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OLD LEATHER HELD THE LIGHT CLOSE TO CHRIS'S FACE, AND TRIED TO MAKE SURE THAT HE WAS ASLEEP.

The Gold Bar Detective;

OR,

Iron Ike, the Solid Man.

BY MAJOR E. L. ST. VRAIN,
AUTHOR OF "TOMBSTONE TOM," "DURANGO
DAVE," "LEADVILLE NICK," "REDTOP
RUBE," "SANCHO PEDRO,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SKELETON UNDER THE RIVER.

"HERE you, Chris King, stir your stumps and throw that pick this way! You're slower than last year's equinoctial."

"Hyar's ther pick, but you'll have ter cool off a trifle afore you git it. I don't approve o' a man gettin' in a spasm in sech weather. It's bad fur the blood!"

"Don't you worry about me, you young scamp. Hand over the pick before I come up and thrash you. Here's a stone in the way which we must turn over."

"Take your teeth, or blow it out. You've enough blow ter raise Clipperator's Needle."

It was a good-humored war of words, and as the last was spoken "the young scamp," as he had been called, handed the pick to his older companion.

The scene was the bed of a small river in California, or, more properly, where a river had once been. It had flowed on peacefully ever since the town of Gold Bar had sprung up not far away; but it had been the general opinion that if they could get at the ground thus covered, the miners would find nuggets of gold lying around loose as thick as cobblestones.

Consequently, the course of the river had been turned where a good chance offered, a short distance above.

When the old bed was bared the miners were disappointed. No nuggets were found lying around loose, and they were left to the knowledge that if gold was had from the place it must be by the regular process of labor.

They were at work there the day on which we open our story, but only one of the diggers deserves particular notice at this point.

Christopher King was a bright, active young fellow of sixteen years, though he was so small of stature that he was generally supposed to be two years younger. He had wandered into Gold Bar six months before, and though no one knew exactly where he came from, he soon made a large number of friends.

But to resume our story.

The flat stone which had barred the miner's way was attacked and turned over, and the men were just preparing to get rid of it when Chris again broke in quickly:

"Hello, thar! You'd better hold on a bit, you fellers. You're robbin' a graveyard, you be. Look before you leap!"

His words were hardly needed, for the men had used their own eyes in the case, and a silence fell over the group which was broken by the irrepressible boy.

"Hyar's ther grave-diggin' scene from Hamlet on its legs, again. Stand back an' give Yorick a show!"

"Durn my buckskins ef this ain't a qua'r place fur a human skelington!" said Ben Eager. "How in ther name o' thunder did it git thar?"

The question was natural, and all looked in wonder. The removal of the flat stone had brought to light a cavity beneath, which was not unlike a shallow grave. In this space lay a human skeleton. Evidently nothing had ever occurred to disturb its rest. Each bone lay where it would if the limbs had been properly composed before it was covered from view.

"I reckon that's ther remains o' one o' them old-time people about which we ain't got no hist'ry," said Alf Tarbell. "He was one o' ther mound-builders, or whatever they is called."

"Nonsense!" said Eager. "He ain't been thar more'n ten or fifteen years. You kin tell by ther state of preservation o' ther remains."

"You can't tell nothin' about it," said Tarbell, doggedly. "Ther time a human bein' lasts after he's buried all depends on ther natur' o' ther s'ile, and so on. This skelington *may* have been hyar only five year, or it may hev been five hundred. Sometimes s'ile, an' other things, is of sech a natur' that bodies 'll last in perfect preservation fur fifty years."

"Tell that ter ther heathen!" scoffed Eager. "You can't stuff me."

"You're a big enough goose ter be stuffed."

"Wal, you ain't man enough ter do it."

"I'm man enough to punch yer head ef you say what I stated ain't a fact!" belligerently declared Tarbell.

There was a prospect of speedy war, but the voice of Chris broke in cheerfully:

"Thar's a pile of logic in what ye both say, but you orter take example from ther skeleton an' ease off on yer wrath. Ther deceased is ther man most int'rested in ther case, an' he's ez quiet ez a lamb."

The skeleton was lifted from its lonely bed and laid out on the bank with a care not to be expected from such rough men. The bones were firm and white, for it had rested so far below the bed of the river that no water had reached it.

It was hard to form a theory how it had come where they found it. No one except Alf Tarbell believed that its history dated back to the first settlers of the country; it was the general opinion that it had not been in the ground more than ten years; but none of them had ever before known a man to be buried so far below a river-bed.

Chris examined the skeleton with more than ordinary interest, and in so doing his fingers touched something hard and sharp on the side of one of the fleshless ribs.

He looked closely at it, and then, drawing his knife, pried out a substance he was not long in recognizing.

It was the point of a knife!

"Wal, that's sorter curious," he thought. "How come ther p'int o' a bowie in this rib? Did it grow thar, or—"

The boy suddenly arose and, just as the men were about to resume shoveling, leaped down

into the grave and began fumbling in the loose dirt.

"Git out o' ther way, you tramp!" said Eager. "D'ye want us ter git docked fur not workin'?"

"He's arter another skelington," said Tarbell.

"Ef that was ther hight o' my ambition, I'd take you!" retorted Chris. "Don't you worry abou' me, fur you can't a'ford ter git thinner."

"Durn ther boyee!" said Tarbell, "he's gittin' too sassy fur this climate; he'll bu'st, one o' these days. My fist is wuss than dynamite when I let out."

He spoke good-naturedly, for no one liked Chris better than he did, but, for once, the boy had no answer ready. He had found something down among the loose earth, and he suddenly stood erect.

"What ye got thar?" Eager asked. "One o' ther skelington's back teeth?"

"Mebbe it's his toe-nail," suggested Tarbell.

"You two kin scoff all ye wanter, but them ez scoffs last is ther upper dog in ther battle. What I've got is ther instrument what killed ther skelington, an' I call on all o' ye ter notice that I take this hyar knife out o' ther same hole ther deceased come from. It may hang him, yit."

"I never heard o' a skelington bein' hanged," said Eager.

"You'll be hanged yit, fur bein' too smart," said Chris, tartly. "I meant ther man that killed him."

"Come, now, ain't ye drawin' it a leetle too strong? How d'ye know he was killed?"

"'Cause I found ther p'int o' a knife in one o' his ribs, an' when I s'arched hyar I found ther rest o' ther thing. See it? It's rayther rusty, but you kin see it's a knife, all samee, an' ther p'int is gone. Now, I argy ther skelington was murdered, an' buried hyar with ther knife still in him."

By this time all laughing had ceased among the miners, and the entire party crowded around the boy, while he went over the ground again.

Whether his theory was correct or not, he carried the crowd along with him, and in five minutes each and all of them were willing to declare that their excavation had brought to light a foul murder. No one suggested that it might have been a case of suicide, and that the river deposit had buried the body; all accepted Chris's theory, and quite an excitement sprung up.

"Somethin' ought ter be did about it," said Eager.

"What'r ye goin' ter do?" asked Tarbell, who was not yet ready to abandon his theory as to the vast age of the skeleton.

"Find out who he war, an' who killed him."

"Call Montezuma ez a witness," scoffed Tarbell.

"This hyar is witness enough," said Chris, as he held up the knife.

"How be ye goin' ter use it?"

"I've diskivered a name on ther handle," replied the boy. "Look at it! 'A. G. Ransom.' Now that was either ther skelington or him who killed him."

"That's what ye call a clew, is it?"

"That's goin' ter be ther means o' hangin' ther killer."

There was a good-natured laugh at this. The men were beginning to recover from their solemnity, and were inclined to drop the matter entirely, and the fact that a boy should put himself forward thus rather pleased them.

"You kin laugh all ye wanter," said Chris, with a show of anger, "but I'll keep ther knife, an' I'm goin' ter know who ther killer was."

CHAPTER II.

SOMEBODY ELSE WANTS THE KNIFE.

ALTHOUGH the miners had so readily accepted Chris's theory that the unknown had died by violence, they were not inclined to accept as true his statement that he would be able to find the assassin, if there was one, by means of so slight a clew.

"Ther knife is marked A. G. Ransom, plain enough," he thought, "an' I reckon that was either ther skelington or ther killer, though it ain't noways sartain. Ef it was, somebody in Californy oughter remember him. Reckon I'll assert an advertisement in ther *Chronicle*."

The news of the discovery in the river-bed was soon carried to the neighboring village, and nearly all Gold Bar turned out and came down to the excavation to look and question. So many came, in fact, that the superintendent of the miners was obliged to keep them all back until his force could put in the two hours of laboring time left them that afternoon.

When work was over Chris promptly left the place and walked toward the village, going ahead of the body of miners. He was walking toward the cabin where he made his quarters, when he was accosted by a well-dressed man of about fifty years.

Josiah Mendick was one of the leading men of Gold Bar. He was proprietor of the leading store in the place—"The Complete Outfit," as the sign over the door announced it—and though he had rivals in the business, his trade was greater than that of all the others combined. He was also a trial-justice in an irregular way, and was usually called Judge Mendick.

"Ah! is it you, Christopher?" he said, as he neared the boy, and his face bore a friendly smile.

"I opine it's a hoss of about my color," Chris admitted.

"I have just heard about the discovery in the old river-bed."

"Hev you? Wal, ther remains is waitin' fur you ter go down an' sot on 'em."

"Who has the knife?"

"I hev that ther' honor—an' ther knife, likewise."

"Very good. Well, I'll take it."

"Hey?"

"I said I would take the knife."

"How d'ye know ye will?"

"Why, it's my place to have it. I am chief judicial officer of Gold Bar, and when a crime has been committed all evidence must be placed in my hands."

"Do you think A. G. Ransom was murdered?"

Mendick started a little and then laughed.

"What an abrupt way you have, Christopher.

How do you know the man was named Ransom?"

"Straws show which way the wind blows, an' this hyar knife tells a tale, too. But that don't count. I'm sorry ter discommode ye, jedge, but findin's is keepin's, an' I'll hang onter ther knife."

"That is impossible. I must take charge of that, and of the remains."

"You kin hev ther skelington, but honors must be divided, an' ez long ez I found the knife I'll keep it."

Mendick frowned.

"See here, you young rascal, I have no time to bother with you. I tell you to give that knife to me, and if you are stubborn I shall compel you. Give me that knife at once, or I'll have you arrested!"

"Put a punctooation p'int thar, boss, an' let us take a chaw o' ther weed afore we go any furder," said Chris, coolly. "I object ter be 'rested. In ther fu'st place thar ain't no recognized form o' law in Gold Bar, an' you ain't no more jedge nor I be. Secondly, I ain't did nothin' ter be 'rested fur. I found a knife in ther river, an' as a quinsequence that knife's mine. You hereby asseverate you are a jedge. Wal, I asseverate I am a Gold Bar Detective, an' propose ter hang onter what evidence I kin collect, an' ef I bring the depredator o' ther crime ter jestice, I shall pocket ther reward. See?"

"Do I see? I see I shall be obliged to thrash you yet, you young hound!" said Mendick, angrily.

"Not ef this court knows herself. I may remind ye o' spring wheat, but I object ter bein' thrashed."

"Give me that knife!" belligerently commanded the judge.

"Why don't ye ask fur ther earth? It strikes me you are a *leetle* too brash fur yer own good, an' ez a free-born American citizen I object ter bein' intimidaterated."

Mendick stamped his foot angrily.

"Do you know who you're talking to? I'm the Judge of Gold Bar!"

"Glad ter meet ye. I'm a devourin' lion with a brown stripe on my back, an' claws fourteen inches long. I'm a hund'ud-pound can o' dynamite, full-proof, an' liable ter 'plode ef shooke up. Ef I combustuate, I shall blow Gold Bar sixty-seven foot inter ther solid surface o' ther sun, whar thar ain't a well-ventilated room in ther hull hotel, an' they'll melt you up fur taller candles—"

Twice, Mendick had attempted to stop the even flow of Chris's remarks, but when the boy got in motion he was as hard to stop as a political speaker, and the judge finally became so angry that he made a rush for him, resolved to take the knife by force.

Chris stopped talking, but he was by no means captured. He avoided Mendick's rush without trouble, and then made off at a run which showed the man how useless pursuit would be. He attempted none.

"Strikes me this is much ado 'bout a knife," thought the boy. "I never knowed old Mendick ter hev so much int'rest in any case afore! Why did he want ther knife so bad? Strikes

me thar is somethin' mysterious about it. Kin it be he wanted ter gobble it an' git it out o' ther way?"

Nobody except Chris, of all the population of Gold Bar, would have entertained such a wild thought.

"I see a toad under ther harrer!" he said, shutting one eye tightly. "Ther jedge had an object fur wantin' that knife. He did that; an' it follers *he* knows somethin' about ther case. It won't be lost time ter look up his past, an' see ef he was ever seen with a man named A. G. Ransom. Strikes me I've heerd it said he was an 'arly settler in this hyar State, an' it may be— Wal, I opine ef I'd been soft enough ter let him hev that knife, I'd never hev see'd it ag'in. Hello! what's ther tumult?"

Chris had been walking rapidly along, but his meditations were suddenly interrupted by the sound of angry voices. He paused for a moment, and then hurried on past a cabin and saw those who were disputing.

Four persons were visible.

The first was a young girl of about Chris's own age, and a very pretty girl at that. Near her were two stout young fellows of nineteen or twenty years, roughly dressed, brutal-looking rascals of the worst type of "border ruffians," if their faces furnished a criterion.

A little apart was the fourth person, a youth of nineteen, whom Chris at once recognized as Ralph Mendick, the son of the judge.

He was facing the trio firmly.

"The young lady has appealed to me for help," he was saying, "and if you think I am going away, and going to desert her, you make a big mistake. I see you are strangers in Gold Bar, and I want to say right at the begining that you can't come here and work in any lawlessness. It is true you are two and I but one, but there are more men about here whom I can easily call."

"It'll be wuss fur you ef you call 'em!" growled one of the young roughs. "I'm Strong Saul, an' I'm a walkin' terror when my mad is up. Ef you fool round hyar any more, I'll take ye by ther slack o' yer neck an' wipe ther ground all up with ye!"

"Your threats have no effect," said Ralph, boldly. "For the last time, I tell you to release that girl."

"I'll see ye in Tophet fu'st! I tell ye she's my sister, an' foolish at that. D'ye s'pose I'd hurt her? No; but I won't see any flashy young buck like you take charge o' a weak-minded gal."

"I am not weak-minded, nor am I his sister!" the girl exclaimed. "I never saw him until two days ago, when I hired him to guide me to Crescent Bend. I have found that I have been taken out of my direct course, and now I ask the honest people here to protect me."

"Rest assured you shall be protected," firmly answered Ralph. "You are among those who tolerate no such work as this. Leave her, you fellows, or I shall call for help!"

Strong Saul drew a revolver with a jerk.

"Utter one squeak, an' I'll put a bullet through ye!" he ferociously said.

And he leveled his revolver at young Mendick's head.

Scarcely had he done so, however, before there was an unexpected interruption to the tableau. Some one shot out from behind the cabin, Strong Saul received a thump that sent his revolver flying one way and himself the other, and then Chris stood revealed to all, a good-natured grin on his sharp face.

"Count me in fur this soar-eel!" he exclaimed. "I am a steel-bound, triple-plated champion o' innocence, an' I'm hyar a-blowin' my bugle fur We, Us & Co.!"

CHAPTER III.

CHRIS INVESTIGATES.

THE coming of the boy materially changed the aspect of affairs. Strong Saul's revolver had fallen nearer Ralph Mendick than its owner, and when he slowly arose he saw that the turn of the tide was against him. His companion had a revolver, but he did not seem inclined to use it, and the girl improved the chance to slip away from the roughs and take position near her champions.

Strong Saul glared angrily at Chris.

"I'll break yer all ter pieces fer that!" he shouted.

"No, ye won't! I may look brittle, but I'm a tough colt in a fragrant pasture, an' it takes a good man ter saddle me. You'd better not be too brash!"

"That's good advice," said Ralph. "Young lady, I think I speak the truth when I say you want no more of these fellows."

"I certainly don't," she answered, quickly.

"Then, the quicker you go, the better."

Ralph addressed Strong Saul, and Chris added:

"Show us ther nails on ther bottom o' yer boots, an' then vanish forever from our view. Git up an' dust, afore I blow ye up with a can o' dynamite I hev in my pocket."

The young roughs were not frightened, but they saw other men of the town approaching, and they concluded that discretion was the wiser part of valor. They had had a definite object in guiding the girl to Gold Bar, instead of to Crescent Bend, and they did not intend to abandon it, but the only way to succeed in the end was to keep themselves clear of the honest men of the Bar.

"We'll go," Strong Saul therefore said, sullenly, "but don't ye think you've seen ther last o' me. I'm a red-hot terror, I be; I lam them as treads on me."

He directed a menacing glance at the Gold Bar Detective.

"I thought ye had a sort o' sheepish look," said the latter, coolly. "Don't get ther hallucination inter yer head that I'm afeered on ye, though, fur I'm a good deal o' a terror, myself, an' that ain't no name when I git on my ear an' howl. Bettei keep away from me, an' save yer family from puttin' on mournin' fur their pet son!"

The last words were spoken in an elevated voice as Strong Saul and his pard strode away. They were reluctant to go, but they were too wise to stay, and considered themselves fortunate in getting off so cheaply.

"I think you will have no further trouble," said Ralph, addressing the young lady.

"For which I owe thanks to you two. I do thank you earnestly, for I had grown terribly afraid of those men, and I am sure harm would have come to me had I not escaped."

"You kin bet all yer loose bits on that," asserted Chris. "Them galoots is bad from ther ground up; I believe they hev actooally p'isoned ther air 'round hyar."

And he sneezed twice in succession.

"How did you happen to have them for your guides?" asked Ralph, who was unusually thoughtful for one of his years.

"I left San Francisco a few days ago to join my father at Crescent Bend. He wrote that I would be met at Swingfoot City by two guides, and these were the men who appeared. I did not like them at the first, and I soon came to the conclusion that they were desperate characters; while, on our arrival here, I discovered that it was not Crescent Bend at all. Immediately after, I saw you and appealed for your aid."

"Well, those fellows were doubtless impostors. I do not believe they were the men your father sent."

"But they had a letter from him."

"Perhaps it was stolen. But let that pass. You are now among friends, and I'll see to it you are well used. My father is Judge Mendick, and he will be pleased to give you shelter for the night, or longer, if you say so, and furnish you with honest guides when you start again for Crescent Bend."

"I must go there to-morrow, for father will be looking for me, but I will accept your offer with many thanks for the night. You are very kind. I have not yet told you my name, but it is Lulo Vaughan."

Ralph's youthful fancy had been a good deal taken by the young lady, and he felt like saying it was a name fit for so pretty a girl, but he repressed the inclination and made a more matter-of-fact and sensible reply.

The two took leave of Chris in a proper manner, and then walked on toward Judge Mendick's.

"Wal, ef ther matinee's over, I reckon I'll amble on ter ther fold," said Chris. "I don't see ez I'm called on ter make any furder efforts in that direction, fur young Mendick is head-over-ears, so quick. Hope ther old gent will be more politer ter her than he was ter me, or, mebbe I'll hev ter go 'round an' apply ther rod o' c'rection. Now fur Old Leather!"

The last words would have been a riddle to a stranger, but Gold Bar rejoiced in a citizen who was known by that name. With him Chris had made his home ever since he came to town. It had been his fortune to save the old man from drowning in the river, near where the skeleton had been found, and he suggested that the boy come to his shanty to live.

He soon arrived at the shanty, and entered.

Old Leather sat in the chair where he was nearly always to be found, for his trade was that of a cobbler; but last and hammer had been laid aside for the time being, and he was eating his supper.

Chris greeted him good-naturedly, and received in reply a growl which did not disturb

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him in the least. He got out some food for himself, began eating and looked over at Old Leather, who was just finishing his own meal.

"You're one o' ther fu'st settlers o' Gold Bar, I b'lieve," he carelessly observed.

"I be that," said Old Leather, forgetting to be sulky. "When I come hyar thar was jest three cabins. Of them as lived in them, Pratt, Wade, Smith an' Taylor, is buried over yender; Gay an' Simonds returned East, and Abe Cor-tion is all that's left in Gold Bar."

"Did you ever know a critter named Ransom?" asked the boy, in his previous tone.

"Ransom? No; thar ain't been no Ransom in Gold Bar sence I've been hyar. Thar never was, fur, ez I said, the town wa'n't more than a month old when I came."

"Did ther river flow in ther channel then outer which we hev turned it?"

"Yes."

"Jedge Mendick is an old settler too, ain't he?"

"Ther jedge? Lord, no! he's only been hyar five year—though he prospected hyar afore Gold Bar was tho'rt on."

"Alone?"

Up to this time Old Leather had answered civilly—something unusual for him—and with the interest of an old settler; while Chris knew by his silence on that point that he had heard nothing about the finding of the skeleton under the river; but at the last question his eyes were suddenly raised from the last he had half-unconsciously picked up, and they shot a keen glance at the boy.

"What wast you said?" he asked, after a pause.

"I asked ef ther jedge was alone when he prospected hyar first?"

"What's that ter you?"

Old Leather spoke with a growl, and his vicious eyes glared at Chris as though he felt a strong desire to eat him up, but the boy was not in the least alarmed. He did, however, see something worthy of notice in the old man's sudden change of manner, and, with his habit of leaping to conclusions, the boy thought:

"Thar's a screw loose hyar, sure as smoke. I'll look inter ther merits o' ther case a few miles."

Aloud he answered:

"It's this ter me, old-time pard: I'm thinkin' o' writin' a hist'ry o' Gold Bar; an encyclopedia massivecuss, ez they would say in ther Root Digger language; an' statistics must be ther bed-rock o' ther biz. I ain't goin' ter write a go-as-you-please hist'ry, like some folks do. Truth must be ther—"

"What're ye lyin' ter me fur, you young hound? You write a hist'ry! Why, ye can't write yer own name!"

"Tain't necessary," said Chris, throwing a bit of bread into the air, and catching it in his mouth as it fell. If I put in ther names o' ther prominentest citizens, like yourn an' ther jedge, it's all right. I don't want ter write my own."

"You'll be hung some day!" growled Old Leather.

"I never stabbed a man with a knife an' buried him under ther river," said Chris, coolly.

Crash!

The cobbler's lap-stone went rattling to the floor, and he stared at the speaker wildly.

"Wh—wh—what?" he stammered.

"Th—th—this!" answered Chris, as he took the rusty knife from his pocket and held it up before Old Leather's eyes.

"What's that?" the cobbler asked.

"That's ther knife that killed ther man that was buried under ther river, that we turned inter a new channel, that flowed past the House that Jack Built," Chris explained.

Old Leather still glared at the rusty knife, while the boy watched him keenly. He noticed that the wrinkled hand on the cobbler's knee trembled, and there was every evidence that *something* had frightened him a good deal.

Was it the knife?

"What man be you talkin' about?" he growled, but there was a quaver in the growl.

"Ther one we found buried under ther river; ther one who was murdered an' buried ther. D'ye ketch on?"

"No, I don't. Tell me what ye mean?"

"I will, though I give ye fair warnin' it'll chill yer young blood, an' make each individooal hair turn a hand-spring over t'others till you think yer scalp is galvanized."

And with this ominous preface, Chris told the story of the skeleton found under the river.

CHAPTER IV.

OLD LEATHER WANTS THE RUSTY KNIFE.

CHRIS told the story in his most graphic way, making his reasons for believing murder had been done as strong as possible, and, so well did he succeed, Old Leather had no argument to present against his theory.

"It's mighty strange!" he said, still looking at the knife.

"Trooth always was flyer than fiction," Chris replied.

"Let me see ther knife!"

The cobbler held out his hand, but Chris motioned him away.

"This instrument o' death is ter be seen, not taken. You kin look at it from a distance, or near at hand, but I am its lawful guardeen, an' I'm goin' ter hang onter it."

He showed the knife, but still retained it, and closely watched Old Leather as he did so. Dried-up as was the old man's face, it was still capable of expression, and Chris knew he was more deeply moved than he would have wished known. Fear and consternation, if not horror, were expressed on his face.

What did it mean? When he announced his intention to the miners of learning who the dead man had been, and who killed him, they had laughed at him for thinking a crime—if crime there was—so long past, could be unraveled, and his own faith was by no means so great as he would have it seem; but here within an hour, two men had been found who exhibited what he thought was too much interest in the matter for honest men to show.

Judge Mendick and Old Leather! They represented entirely different grades of society, and he had never seen them together—could they have been partners, and knowing to that crime of the long ago?

Gradually, however, a speculative, cunning look came to the old man's face.

"It is an odd story," he said, "an' ez it may be wal ter keep ther knife, I'll put it away safe fur you."

And he once more put out his hand.

"I've got a safe o' my own, an' it's burglar-proof," said the boy, as he put the knife in his pocket.

"But you may lose it," urged Old Leather.

"That's my hunt."

"Or hev it stole?"

"Ef anybody is brash enough ter try it, he'll git his cranium cleaved. You make a note o' that, will ye?"

"But you'll be held 'sponsible fur it."

"Who'll hold me? It'll take a mighty good man ter do it, when I git steam up, fur I'm a forty-hoss power locomotion, now you kin gamble. But, see hyar, O. L., what d'ye know about this rusty knife an' skelington, anyhow?"

"Me? I don't know nothin'."

"Ef you's my son I'd chastise you; durn my shoe-strings ef I wouldn't. O. L., you're too old tu lie; ther hey-day o' yer lyin' career is over, an' November hez nipped ther crop. You don't lie pooty, nor natural, nor in time an' tune. You give yerself dead away!"

"Now, you see hyar!" cried Old Leather, angrily, "I ain't goin' ter stand no sech talk ez that. I ain't ter be insulted by no hop-o'-my-thumb like you; not by a thunderin' sight. You dry up an' go ter bed."

"I ginerally schedule my retirin' at an hour ter suit myself, Old Leather, but ez long ez you're so cranky, I ain't goin' ter waste my eloquence onter ye. I'll seek more congenital s'ciety. So-long!"

And the boy arose and left the cabin.

"I've run onter ther butt eend o' a full-fledged mystery. Ther skelington wa'n't no fossil o' A. D. 1350, but a product o' ther present Century, an' both Jedge Mendick an' Old Leather could tell a heap about it ef they's ter unfold their information. But they won't. Why? Stands ter reason they've got a guilty secret ter hide. Result, I'm goin' ter abandon minin' operations an' start ther Gold Bar Detective Bureau; C. King, President an' Manager!"

And Chris walked down the street with a thumb in each arm-hole of his vest.

He went straight to the Delta Saloon, which was Gold Bar's chief place for the destruction of liquor, money and brains—the three usually vanish together—and walked in. He did not go to imbibe, but he knew he should find nearly all of Gold Bar there, and he wanted to hear what was said.

The majority of the miners were there, though it was a place Judge Mendick never visited, nor was his son allowed there.

Chris was soon the focus of interest. It had been noised abroad that he had declined to give the old knife to Mendick, and many of the miners amused themselves in trying to frighten him—a task about as hopeful as would be an attempt to overturn the mountain.

When they saw the folly of trying they abandoned it, and after Chris had played a few games of chess with a friend, he left the Delta and started for home.

He had, however, barely passed out when a man moved to his side; Chris looked at him doubtfully, for he had reason to believe he was making enemies in Gold Bar, but the man spoke pleasantly.

"I wanter shout a column o' words in yer left ear, young pard, ef you'll give it to me."

"I ain't goin' ter give it away ter any kangaroo in Californy," was the sturdy reply. "Mebbe it's big enough fur two, but I use it fur a blanket at night, an' ez cold weather's comin' on, I ain't goin' ter hev cold feet an' get the influenza. But you kin shout all ther same."

"Took ye a mighty long while ter say so, but ther shortest way across ain't allays ther quickest way home. What I hev ter orate is this: You did right not ter let any one hev that knife."

Chris grew really interested.

"Mebbe you want it?" he suggested.

"No, I don't; jest you hang onter it like a barnacle. You are a keener, an' I say ter you, use yer wits wal an' don't let no livin' soul git ther drop on you."

The man's voice was earnest.

"I don't re-cog-nize yer phiz," said Chris. "Who be ye?"

"My name is Iron Ike, more generally knowed ez Ther Solid Man from Slow-Coach. Prob'lly you've hearn o' me."

"Can't say I hev, Isaac."

"Wal, I'm all my name implies; I'm a Solid Man, an' when I put my shoulder ter ther wheel ther tire bends."

"How about yer cheek?"

"Come, now, don't ye try ter querril with me, fur I ain't that kind. I'm yer friend, an' don't ye forgit it. I'm a stranger in Gold Bar; but I've come ter stay, an' ez I see trouble a-looming up fur ye, I'm goin' ter help ye all I kin."

His voice was earnest, and Chris was rather favorably impressed.

"How do ye know trouble is a-loomin'?"

"Fur one thing, you've got Strong Saul an' his pard, Turk Tucker, down on ye; an' thar may trouble grow outer this knife biz."

"In what way?"

"D'ye s'pose Jedge Mendick is goin' ter be bluffed by you?"

"He can't hev ther knife, anyhow."

"He wants it, an' he'll try fur it, an' it's ter your good, ter keep yer eyes open. Mind what I say, an' look out fur that knife. Ef yer need help, come ter me. I'm an imported maelstrom, a whirlpool o' first water, but I'm so slenderly hooped that when I bu'st out I'm wuss than seven blizzards. Jest amble under my wing, chick, when ye see a cloud in ther west."

"I never knowed a smart chick ter git under a rooster's wing yit, an' I reckon I kin keep my eend up. Ez fur you, ye seem ter mean wal, an' ef ye git into diffikilty, mention my name an' it'll be all right. So long!"

And Chris walked rapidly away.

"It's durned qua'r what an interest hez sprung up about that rusty old knife," he was thinking. "Ther foundation o' Gold Bar s'ciety is stirred up, an' I reckon C. King will be a much-sought arter individ afore many days. That's all 'cause I've struck out fur myself an' become a detective. But what o' Ther Solid Man

from Slow-Coach? Is he friend or foe? I b'lieve he's int'rested in ther old knife, hisself. Durn yer picture, C. King, ye want ter look wild or somebody'll sit down on ye!"

When the youth reached home he found Old Leather had retired, so he made no talk but went quietly to his own couch, which was at the opposite side of the room.

He had intended to remain awake and form a plan for his proposed detective work, but sleep overcame him before he was aware of it, and he forgot all about the skeleton they had found under the river.

When he awoke it was with the dim idea that something was wrong, but he was a young man of a good deal of presence of mind, and he quietly opened his eyes just a trifle and looked out of the cover.

The first thing he saw was a light; the next, Old Leather.

The cobbler was using the lamp to narrowly search all around, but he did not seem to find what he wanted, and a grim smile crossed Chris's face.

"Ther old sinner is arter ther knife!" he thought. "I'll lay still an' let him s'arch."

CHAPTER V.

A MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT.

CHRIS had made no mistake; the cobbler was looking for the knife; but while he had seen Chris put it into his jacket-pocket at supper-time, the jacket was not now visible.

This was simple enough, for the boy had put it under his blanket when he retired, but it took Old Leather some time to arrive at the explanation.

When he did, he paused, looked keenly at Chris, held the light close to his face and tried to make sure that he was asleep. Chris bore the test well and did not stir in the least, and the old man seemed satisfied.

He set his lamp down and began running his hand slowly and carefully under the blanket, but he had progressed but a little when a hand dropped upon his head, four fingers were twisted into his hair, and he received a twist that made him howl.

"Hi! Help! Let go!" he bawled.

"Nary let go!" exclaimed Chris. "Whar's my scalpin'-knife? I'll lift yer scalp in ther tremor o' a mule's off heel. Down, an' wipe up ther floor!"

He had swung off of his bed and rolled Old Leather over, but as his only object was to give him a scare, he pretended to suddenly recognize him and arose.

"Great snakes!" he ejaculated. "It ain't no assassinator, arter all, but Old Leather. By jinks! that war a narrer escape; I nigh-about raised yer ha'r afore I diskivered yer identiky."

"You almost pulled my head off!" groaned the cobbler.

"Never mind that; it don't count. Rise up an' j'ine yer voice with mine in a pair o' thangs-givin' that no devestation ain't done. But, I say, O. L., what was ye arter 'round my couch?"

"A drink o' water," said Old Leather, ruefully.

"I s'pose ye think my boots only need a pump

set up in 'em ter be a forty-foot well. That's whar ye're off. Don't yer think ye kin bamboozle me; ye wanted ter steal my knife. Durn my silk hat ef I like sech a room-mate!"

The joke was over, and Chris spoke sharply.

"You're wrong, Chris; you r'ally be—"

"Wrong yer granddad! What was yer insinervatin' yer dirty paw under my blanket fur? Old Leather, fur a man o' yer maturity, ye're a disgrace ter polished society. A thief in ther night is a cattle fit only fur ther butcherer."

"I meant it fur yer good," said the cobbler, sullenly. "You'll git inter trouble about that knife."

"Somebody else will, ef I ain't let alone. I give ye fa'r warnin' ter keep off, an' ye know I'm a fifty-pound porcupine, with quills eleven inches long, so that when I git my back up ye'd think a needle gun was at work. That's all I've got ter say, but ef you show up on my side o' the shanty ag'in, thar'll be ther wu'st first o' May cleanin' out ye ever see'd in yer life. So-long!"

Chris turned his back to the cobbler, and the latter went grumbling back to bed. His fighting days were about over, and he would not have dared attack the active boy, so he decided to make no further move toward the rusty knife, upon the handle of which was the name, "A. G. Ransom."

The following morning Ralph Mendick was late at the breakfast-room, but when he entered he saw the judge there alone, reading a San Francisco paper.

"Where is Miss Vaughan?" he asked.

"She has not yet appeared," the elder Mendick replied, without raising his eyes from the paper.

Ralph said no more, though he was rather surprised, but when, ten minutes later, breakfast was ready, and the housekeeper entered, the judge laid aside his paper with the dignified air of a man who feels that he has climbed to a height from which he can look down upon the world.

"You had better go and notify the young lady that we await her presence, Mrs. Schell," he said.

Mrs. Schell went. Ralph had conducted Lulo Vaughan directly to the house after rescuing her from Strong Saul and Turk Tucker, and, as he had expected, she was kindly welcomed by his father and made to feel at her ease. The judge said she could remain with them as long as she chose, but if she felt able, and preferred to do so, she could go to Crescent Bend the next day and he would see that she had an honest and capable guard.

Thus matters stood when the family retired.

But when Mrs. Schell returned, matters took a new and unpleasant turn.

"The young lady is not in her room," she announced.

"Not there!" ejaculated Ralph.

"No, sir."

"Good heavens! have those roughs succeeded in penetrating to the house?"

"You jump at conclusions," said the judge, reprovingly. "Of course no one has been in

the house. The young lady has gone for a walk, or something of the kind. She will return shortly. We will wait for her just five minutes."

The bed had been occupied, but the clothing was turned neatly back, showing that there had been no struggle; so far, it looked as though no enemy had been there.

Ralph, however, was not inclined to give up easily, and he looked further. He had no doubt but the girl had been abducted, and if such was the fact it seemed probable they had entered by the windows of this particular room.

He failed, however, to find any evidence to this effect. There were no marks of a ladder at the base of the house; no signs that people had passed in and out over the casing. The windows were up, but Mrs. Schell stated that it was she who had opened them. She said that they had not been fastened.

Ralph was foiled in his detective work, but his opinion did not waver, and by the time breakfast was eaten the judge was inclined to share his fears.

The judge went out, after promising to institute a search, himself, but he had other work on hand. During the night he had given more thought to the matter of the river skeleton and the old knife, and he resolved to have the latter, whether the law was with him or not.

It was time Gold Bar had a judicial head, and as the people had assumed the habit of calling him "judge," he determined to assume the duties of the office.

Consequently he at once hunted up a man named Ezekiel Cribbs, who was his humble and obedient servant in the fullest sense of the word, and sent him with two other men to find Chris, and secure the rusty knife. If the boy would yield it peaceably, all well and good; if not, they were to take it by force.

Cribbs went, but, after a long absence, returned to say that Chris was not to be found in the village. He had left the shanty before Old Leather awoke, so the latter knew nothing about him.

CHAPTER VI.

CHRIS TAKES THE TRAIL.

WHEN Detective Chris arose that morning he had a definite object in view, and after leaving the shanty he went at once to another one which was much like it.

Old Leather had said that Abe Corton was the only survivor of the original settlers of Gold Bar, and Chris had decided to visit him and learn what he could, though he feared that would not prove a great deal, nor of value in any way.

Corton was a veteran Californian, for he had come there with the gold rush of '49, and age had at last stolen upon and incapacitated him from further work. He remained in Gold Bar, and had as much pride in the place as though it boasted a population of a million.

He was an active old man, and it was because Chris knew he took a walk every pleasant morning that he was now out so early. He was fortunate in finding him, and soon had the old man deep in recollections of the past.

"Yes, my boy, I drove the first nail ever hammered in Gold Bar—together with my pards, I put up three shanties in one day. That was the beginning of Gold Bar, though the soil had before been worked some all around here."

"Who by?" Chris asked.

"Various parties. Judge Mendick was one of them. He was here with two or three pards something like five years before I drove the first nail, but he says they never tried the soil in this immediate vicinity."

Chris shut one eye.

"Who was his pards?" he asked.

"I believe they have all returned East—I don't know their names. Wait! it strikes me that Tom Biddle, over at Swingfoot City, was once out with him. Yes, I know he was; though I don't know in what year."

"What sort o' a file is Biddle?"

"What sort of a—what?" questioned Corton, in a puzzled way, for Chris was sometimes too deep for him.

"What kind o' a man?"

"Oh, I see! Well, he's a good fellow, though when I tried to talk with him, I soon found he had a prejudice against the judge; and as I knew Mendick was an excellent man, we did not talk much longer. I did not care to hear slurs on the character of our foremost citizen."

Chris had heard enough, and as soon as possible he bade Corton adieu, and went to a man from whom he had often before hired a horse. He had no trouble on the present occasion, and he was soon mounted and on his way to Swingfoot City.

"I s'pose this is a wild goose chase," he muttered, as he rode along, "but when a man goes inter ther detective business he's got ter ketch holt o' ev'ry chance. Nobody wouldn't make a success if they let things go uns'arched inter. So I'll try Biddle an' see ther result. Ef I succeed in this ventur', I'm goin' ter 'stablish a reg'lar detective agency, an' take pupils in ther biz. Lemme see—I'll call it 'C. King's Gold Bar Detective Bureau.' Thar's nothin' like strikin' ther public hard when ye hit 'em a tall, an' I want ter make a success in business."

The youth straightened his small form and looked as dignified as though he were a candidate for Congress.

It was a long ride to Swingfoot City, and, despite his early start, it was two o'clock in the afternoon when he reached that place.

He at once inquired where Tom Biddle was to be found, and was not at all abashed when he learned that in Swingfoot City, that gentleman was known as Thomas Biddle, Esquire, President of the Sierra Summit Bank. If he had been President of the United States, Chris would have gone to interview him with the same confidence.

He walked into the bank building and, pausing, glanced about. The cashier looked at him superciliously, but Chris remained cool and, seeing a portly gentleman not far away who had an air of authority, he walked to the railing which surrounded him and coughed to attract his attention, but the gentleman was busy over some papers and did not stir.

"Ef it wouldn't be too brash," said Chris,

coolly, "I'd like ter inquire of this hyar is President Biddle."

The gentleman look up impatiently.

"Yes. What is it?"

"It's me, ez much ez anything, an' as I've come on biz, I'll walk in."

And he unceremoniously invaded the magnate's quarters.

"Do you want to make a deposit?" sharply asked the great man.

"No; I'm squand'ring my inheritance, terday, instead o' addin' to it. My biz is with you, privately, an' is as follers, ter wit: I'm compilin' a hist'ry o' ther struggles an' triumphs o' ther 'arly settlers o' Californy, from ther time Columbus landed at San Francisco, in '49, ter ther present epigram. We propose ter make it a work o' compendious size, an' we shall send it clean ter Turkey ter hev it bound in bang-up style. It will be emblazoned with numerous steel engravin's, which we buy cheap from them that steal 'em, an'—"

Thus far Mr. Biddle had listened in utter amazement, but he broke in on this even flow of words at last.

"Good heavens! what are you talking about, boy? Are you an escaped lunatic, or what's the matter with you?"

"I'm in my usual health, thank ye—that's nothin' ther matter with me. A 'zamination o' my pulse will show it keepin' fu'st-class time."

Biddle smiled, despite his first vexation.

"I see you want something, so make your object known at once. Don't make any more talk about your history, but come right down to bottom facts. What do you want?"

"I'll question ye in a joodical way. You are one o' ther 'arly prospectors, 'long hyar?"

"Yes."

"You don't look like a miner now?"

"I abandoned the life long ago. In fact, I was in it but a year. That was fourteen years ago. I left 'Frisco with two companions and spent a year along in this section, but pay dirt was scarce and I abandoned the life, as I said before."

"Allow me ter inquire who was yer pards then?"

"Josiah Mendick and Warren Elwood."

"Whar be they now?"

"Mendick is at Gold Bar. Elwood I know nothing about."

"When did you see ther latter last?"

"When I severed my connection with the two. I left them prospecting together."

"An' you've never seen Elwood sence?"

"No. Mendick told me he returned East."

Further questioning developed more particulars about the three pards. Each had been about thirty years of age. Biddle and Elwood had always been on good terms, but with Mendick the former had had frequent little quarrels. They amounted to nothing and were soon over, but they left their impression and Biddle disliked him. Mendick and Elwood had always agreed well, and there had been some talk of partnership between the two when they "struck it rich."

Like all old Californians, Biddle liked to talk of his early experience, and in doing so he forgot

that his auditor was a boy. The sharp, keen face before him interested him, and he talk freely.

"Did you ever know a man named Ransom A. G. Ransom?" pursued the Gold Bar Detective.

"No. Wait! The name is familiar—yes; ther was such a man in a prospecting-party whic camped near us."

Chris's eyes sparkled.

"What became o' him?"

"His party tried a blasting experiment, an poor Ransom was killed thereby."

"An' buried—whar?"

"Do you know where Cone Hill is?"

"Yas."

"He was buried on the south side of tha peak. Elwood, Mendick and myself went ove to the burial. We selected as pleasant a spot a we could, piled heavy rocks upon the grave t keep away wolves or other prowlers, and ther he rests now."

Chris's face had fallen. If Ransom had bee buried on Cone Hill, it was not reasonable t suppose it was his body that was found in th river-bed, five miles distant. But the boy ha at last discovered who, and what, had been th man whose name was on the old knife.

"Had Ransom been the murderer, or— Chris suddenly had another idea.

"What become o' his outfit-tools, weapons, an' so on?"

"I suppose his partners took them."

"Elwood or Mendick didn't hev a share, did they?"

"Not that I remember. Fourteen years is a long time to recollect such trivial matters."

It did, indeed, seem a trifling affair to him, but Chris looked at it in a different way. He failed to get any more information from Biddle, however, and as he was not ready to tell him of the skeleton found under the river, he nonchalantly observed that he had "just dropped in fur a leetle chat on old times," and received a smiling good-by from the president, who had taken a fancy to him. Then he left the bank.

CHAPTER VII.

A COMPANION ON THE ROAD.

"WAL, I don't seem ter hev made no great stride toward the desired eend," thought Chris, as he walked down the street, "but ther Gold Bar Detective Bureau ain't ter be bluffed off easy. I argue ther case like this: Ther skelington is Warren Elwood. Arter Biddle left him an' Mendick alone, ther latter killed ther *diseased*. Mebbe 'twas fur his gold; mebbe they had a quarrel about suthin'. But whar does A. G. Ransom's knife come in? Ef I could prove that either Mendick or Elwood became possessor on't arter A. G. Ransom was killed, thar would be light in my path. All samee, I still b'lieve Mendick did it, fur he was awfully flustered 'bout suthin' when he 'costed me. But whar does Old Leather come in?"

This question was what Chris, after due reflection, pronounced a "sticker." He never wavered in his opinion that the cobbler did know something about the river tragedy—else, why was he so moved by the episode—but there was nothing to show that such a man had been

about at the time Warren Elwood disappeared from California.

"Wal, I don't know *whar* Old Leather comes in, but I'm goin' ter sift this matter, even if I hev ter take a pard. I'd like some good man ter send ter Jedge Mendick, who should pertend ter be an old friend o' Elwood's, an' ask Mendick *whar* he is, or *whar* he went ter."

Chris tried to think of a suitable man for this office, but no one he could think of seemed the sort of an ally he wanted.

Although walking mechanically, he had gone straight toward the hotel where he had put up his horse, and, as he reached it, he aroused from meditation. Just as he was entering he saw two persons walking away, and, though their backs were toward him, he recognized Strong Saul and Turk Tucker, the young roughs from whom he and Ralph had rescued Lulo Vaughan.

His first impulse was to inquire for an officer and have them arrested, but he abandoned the idea, after a moment's thought, and entered the hotel.

Night was fast approaching, but, as he intended to return to Gold Bar, he ordered an early supper, and then took his departure. He had traveled in the darkness before, and was not afraid of it.

The road he had to travel was a wild and lonely one. All the way it was a succession of mountainous ridges, while the valleys which intervened were nearly as rough and rocky as the higher land. It seemed just the place for road-agents, but nothing of that kind had ever been seen in that section, and Chris set off without a thought of danger.

If anything unpleasant did occur, he had a revolver and knew how to use it.

His horse seemed to realize that it was homeward bound, and showed a desire to make good progress, which Chris did not check, so they went off at a lively trot, which only abated when they reached the rough district beyond Black Run.

By that time darkness had fallen, and the boy let the horse choose his own pace, and settled down to thought.

How was he to take his next step in ferreting out the mystery of the old knife? In his opinion it was important to learn if Warren Elwood lived, or had really been killed there in the bleak hills, as he suspected; and the only known way of doing this was to interview Mendick.

Clearly, he needed the services of a partner, but who was fit for the office? If he admitted any one as a sharer in the secrets of the Gold Bar Detective Bureau, he must be a good man.

He was deep in thought when his horse first erected his head and then neighed, and Chris, looking ahead, saw a dark object in front, on the trail, which soon proved to be another horse.

He rode closer and saw a man standing beside it.

"Hullo!" said the latter.

"Hullo!" slowly answered the boy.

"Are you in a hurry?"

"Wal, sorter. That's one o' my pecooliarities. Why d'ye ask?"

"My horse has fallen lame, and I have a good deal of trouble to get him along."

"Wal, what's that got ter do with my bein' in a hurry?"

"I thought, perhaps, we could join forces to mutual advantage. The animal is all right when I'm not on his back, and as you are a good deal lighter than I, it strikes me he wouldn't mind your weight."

"In plain U. S., you propose we swap?"

"Not permanently, but only for awhile. We could keep together on the trail, and help each other, you know. If you will do this I'll give you a ten-dollar gold-piece."

The manner of the stranger was very plausible, and the offer he made was one which appealed to Chris's fancy a good deal. He was not so well stocked with gold that he could afford to throw any over his shoulder.

"Wal, I'm allays open ter indoocemunts, an' we kin try ther 'speriment ef ye wish, but I'd whisper in yer ear beforehand that I'm a very fly lad, an' ez I don't know ye from Settin' Bull, I prefar that you keep clos't ter my elbow ez we amble along."

"In other words, you don't want me to steal your horse," was the laughing reply. "Well, that's all right, and I commend your thoughtfulness. I'll keep beside you, though you will soon see that my horse, despite his temporary lameness, is by far the more valuable animal."

"I'll take your word fur it, ez ther condition o' ther night ain't 'zactly favorable fur an ortical 'zamination."

The change was made and their journey resumed. The strange horse bore Chris without any great trouble, though he limped slightly, and he did, indeed, seem to be a fine animal.

They rode on at a gentle trot, and the stranger talked pleasantly. He said he was looking for a good place to locate in California, one where he could go into mining with some prospect of success, and that he had been advised to visit Gold Bar.

"I don't 'magine you'll stay long," said Chris.

"Why not?"

"'Cause Gold Bar ain't overflowin' with honey an' ile. Ther name is a holler delusion. I've been thar several months, an' put out a good 'eal o' money an' time, but I don't s'pose I'm wu'th more'n half a million now."

"More than how much?"

"Half a million."

The stranger was silent for at least half a minute.

"Your father must be a capable business man if he has accumulated as much as that."

"If he has! Wal, you're shoutin' now. He's a daisy, he is, ef he's got half a million, an' I'd like ter make his acquaintance."

"Whose acquaintance?"

"My parient's."

"I don't understand."

"I thought not. You spoke ez though I owed my prosperity ter a father who had reared me in the lap o' luxury, but sech is not ther fact. I'm a self-made man, an' ther fu'st, last an' only one o' my race. I never had no parients, an' represent a distinct species o' the human race."

"What's your name?" asked the stranger, laughing.

"C. King. What's yourn?"

"Locke."

"That's a good— Wait a bit. Whar be we goin'?"

"To Gold Bar, I suppose."

"Not ef we pursue that rowt. Sheer off a few p'ints ter ther wind'ard, an' keep ther trail."

"That's the right way."

"Wrong, pard; *this* is ther way."

"I am positive I'm right," insisted Locke.

"Mebbe you kin teach an ole settler ther color o' gold! Nonsense! I come ter Californy when ther 'Forty-niners did, an'—"

"Now, Jack!"

Locke spoke the words sharply, and as he did so he struck the black with his open hand. Instantly the animal shot up the gulch which Chris had insisted was the wrong way, and the stranger kicked the slower steed he bestrode to keep by his side.

Chris tugged in vain at the bridle, and as he saw that Locke only exerted himself to keep beside him, a suspicion flashed upon him.

He had been made the victim of a trick; he was mounted on a trained horse, and was being kidnapped for some nefarious purpose.

"Just you see hyar," he said, turning to Locke, "this ain't ther way I'm goin' jest now, an' ef you don't stop this hyar fiery, untamed steed o' yourn, I'll cut his throat!"

The stranger thrust a revolver against the boy's head.

"Make one hostile move, or try to leap from the horse, and I'll blow out your brains!" he sternly said.

Chris sat still. Locke held the drop, and his voice told that he would keep his threat, and as the Gold Bar Detective was not yet ready to surrender his life, he concluded to make the best of it.

"You advance convincin' arguments," he said, grimly, "but I'd like ter know why ther howlin' blizzards you're engineerin' this racket."

"You will know soon enough."

"I can't know too soon. Spit it out."

"I won't! Anything more you want?"

"Yas. Give me the earth, well-done, turned over and buttered on both sides."

"Peace, fool!"

"I object ter yer ch'ice o' words. Your manners is too abrupt fur one who come in uninvited. You'd better keep ter yerself."

Chris had not been talking without an object; he was gathering all his efforts for an attempt at escape; and as the last words passed his lips he made an effort to swing off the black horse.

In vain! He had to deal with a man as sharp as himself and a good deal stronger, and he was not only forced down on the animal's back in an uncomfortable position, but kept there despite all his efforts to escape.

There was a brief lull in events, and then they swept under what seemed a great shed, but Chris suspected it was a cave. Forward a few feet they went, and then a light appeared; a man stood waving a torch; and the young prisoner, looking, recognized Strong Saul and his partner in villainy, Turk Tucker!

CHAPTER VIII.

IRON IKE'S TROUBLESONE QUESTIONS.

DURING the day there was more or less activity at Gold Bar. Judge Mendick having ordered Chris's arrest, had men looking for him, but he was not found.

Ralph Mendick, seeing that his father was by far too apathetic in regard to the missing girl, Lulo Vaughan, privately offered a reward to some of the men he could trust, if they could find her. But they, too had failed.

Over the Delta Saloon was a so-called "Lodging-house," but it was all in one room, and the beds were oblong boxes, with pine boughs for mattresses. Yet, simple as was the accommodation, it seemed to be all that Iron Ike, The Solid Man Slow-Coach, required. At any rate, he had taken quarters there.

Shortly after dark he left the Delta, walked to judge Mendick's house, and was soon in a private room with that person.

The judge looked at him somewhat superciliously, for the Solid Man was unshaven and unshorn, shabbily dressed, and none too clean, but he made it a rule to hear all that his fellow-townsmen had to say to him.

"You're Judge Mendick, what used ter be called Si Mendick, hain't you?" Iron Ike asked.

"That's my name," stiffly answered the judge.

"Then my biz is with you. I'd like ter inquire whar Warren Elwood is."

Mendick started, and a book which lay on the table beside him was knocked down thereby. He slowly picked it up, walked to the mantel, and put it away, and then took another seat, one where his back was toward the light.

"Elwood, did you say?"

There was a generl carelessness in his voice, but Iron Ike did not fail to distinguish the fact that his pompous air was gone.

"That war ther name."

"I don't think I ever knew any such man."

"Who was third man o' ther prospect party you an' Tom Biddle went out with fourteen year ago?"

"Ah! I remember now. Yes, Elwood was one of us; a good-hearted, jovial fellow, who was liked by all. Did you say you knew where he was?"

"No, I didn't. I asked ef *you* knew."

"I don't. I haven't seen him, nor heard from him, in many years. He returned East."

"Did he write ter you arterwards?"

"Once, only—from San Francisco. He said he was to sail in a day or so. I never heard from him after."

"I reckon nobody ever did. He didn't ever git home."

"Not reach home?"

"No."

"That was odd!"

"Mighty odd!" said the Solid Man, dryly. "I'm an agent from his family, a-tracin' on him, an' I mean ter do it, inch by inch. You are ther last man, 'cordin' ter evidence, that see'd him."

Ike was looking keenly at the judge, but the latter's temporary nervousness was over and he met the gaze firmly.

"It will be difficult to trace him after all these years, I'm afraid," he observed.

"I look ter you ter solve ther mystery."

"To me?"

"Yas."

"Well, I've told you all I know; how he went to San—"

"He didn't go ter 'Frisco!" broke in Iron Ike. "You'n me may ez wal come ter bed-rock right away, 'squire. You know, an' I know, that he never went ter 'Frisco. When Tom Biddle dissolved partnership with you, he left ther two on ye on ther mount'n tergether. Bime-by you showed up in civilized parts. Elwood never did. Why? That's what I want ter know!"

The Solid Man's manner had grown aggressive, and he looked at Mendick in a way not to be mistaken.

"Am I his keeper?" demanded Mendick, affecting resentment. "He was a free agent, and when he got ready to leave me, he left. He was a good fellow, but that was no reason why I should hunt him up if he failed to write when he reached the East. You are too fast—"

"Wait a minute," said Iron Ike, coolly. "Thar's more ter be explained. Elwood war a married man, an' when he come ter Californy he left his motherless boy in charge o' friends in Illinois. You say he finally decided ter return East, but I kin prove ter ther contrary. He decided ter stay in Californy, an' fur that reason he sent East fur his boy, who was then a kid. Ther boyee was brought ter 'Frisco by a gold-seeker's fambly, an' thar claimed by a man who said he war Elwood. I claim 'twa'n't Elwood at all. Now, who was it?"

"Great heavens, man!" said the judge, with what seemed a despairing gesture, "have you drank all the liquor kept at the Delta? You talk wilder than a lunatic."

"Never you mind; I sha'n't keep ter myself, an' you can't make me; I'm goin' through with this case."

"What do you mean?" blustered the judge.

"I mean that I want ter know whar is ther son o' Warren Elwood; that's what I mean, old man."

"What in perdition have I to do about it? You're an infernal modest man, you are; why don't you ask for the earth?"

"Never you mind *that*, but I'll tell ye what I think you had ter do about it. Fur one thing, I think you was ther man w'ot took away Elwood's boy. Why did ye do it? That air is a conundrum, but it's my theory 'twas ter prevent people inquirin' fur ther dad."

"What would I care how much they inquired for him?" angrily demanded Mendick.

"Now you git right down ter biz," said the Solid Man, as he deliberately rested his elbows on his knees and stared at his companion. "I hev a dim recollection o' a man named Cain who talked about ther same as you do, an' bimeby, when ther police got on ther trail, it was found out that somebody was killed."

Thus far Judge Mendick had hoped to avert the storm, but as the last hope vanished he arose to his feet, his face pale and set.

"You infernal dog!" he hissed, "I've heard enough of your cheap talk. I can already see your purpose; you want to blackmail me. It

won't work. I shall show you I am not to be bearded in my own house. Take yourself off, or I'll throw you out!"

Iron Ike arose, a good-natured grin on his face.

"I think I hear you a-shoutin'," he observed, "but I reckon ye don't know who ye're talkin' to. I'm a brindled bull-dog, with three rows o' teeth an' all sharpened like a cross-cut saw. You throw me out! Why, ye pore, miserable critter, ef I was ter lay a hand on ye onc't, ye'd spread out just like a pancake. Ye would, by mighty!"

"Get out of my house!"

"Nary git!"

The Solid Man stood his ground, still smiling in a jolly way, and his powerful form so impressed the judge with the idea that he *was* a solid man, that he had a natural reluctance to attempt to carry out his threat.

"Tell me plainly what you want," he sullenly said.

"None o' yer money; bet yer last bit on that!" Ike sturdily replied. "I want ter know two things. First: What become o' Warren Elwood? Second: What become o' Elwood's son? Now, don't go fur ter deny nothin', fur ef ye do I'll come down on ye hard. I give ye a chance ter kick out o' ther muss all right. Tell me whar ther boyee is, an' you'll see me backin' off in ther shake o' a lamb's leg."

"I know nothing about the child, save that Warren Elwood casually mentioned that he *had* a son. I never saw him, I did not before suspect he was taken West, and I have no knowledge whatever of him."

"Bewar'!"

"Of what?" haughtily asked the judge.

"O' me!"

The good-natured smile had gone, and Iron Ike stood before the dismayed judge with the manner of a hungry tiger.

"Ye want ter go slow," he added, "fur I'm a devourin' lion when I git my back up. I'm in 'arnest, too; ez I said, I ain't no blackmailer; I don't want yer money an' won't hev it; but ef ye don't go a bit slow I *will* put yer neck in a noose!"

The judge's face could not grow paler, but its expression showed increasing consternation.

"What do you mean?" he gasped.

"I mean that I think ye murdered Warren Elwood!"

It was out at last—the charge Mendick had expected—but he had before reached the depth of dismay, and the plain charge served to nerve him to a dangerous pitch. He resolved that Iron Ike should never have a chance to babble his suspicion to others.

"Ef I hadn't s'pected it afore," the Solid Man continued, "I should 'a' done so when Chris the Gold Bar Detective found ther knife by ther skeleton in ther river. That boy is a keener, an' he tumbled ter biz right away. Old man, that was Elwood's skeleton, an' you killed him!"

Mendick had heard enough. He knew just how dangerous Iron Ike was, and he resolved to put an end to it at once. He bounded forward like a panther, and the assault was so sudden that the Solid Man was taken off his guard and dashed to the floor.

Another moment and Mendick was kneeling upon his breast, both hands clasped around his victim's neck, and engaged in the deliberate object of murder.

"Die!" he hissed madly. "Die, like the dog you are!"

CHAPTER IX.

CHRIS FACES THE MUSIC.

If anything had been needed to convince Chris that he had got into a bad difficulty, the appearance of Strong Saul and Turk Tucker was sufficient to establish the point. From the time he had helped baffle them when Lulo Vaughan was their prisoner, he had realized that their spite would be no common one; that they would be revenged if such a thing was possible; and when he saw them in the cave it was no great surprise.

"C. King, Detective, you're in a discomfounded diffikilty," he muttered. "These galoots will 'most likely try ter extinguish ther lamp o' genius that burns in yer head, but ye must face ther music an' beat yer own drum fur all it's wu'th."

"Dismount!"

It was Locke's stern voice, and Strong Saul added in a bullying tone:

"Yas, pile off'n thar, you undersized baboon or I'll bu'st yer cocoanut all ter smash."

"Fruit always comes down when its ripe, an' ez I'm pooty nigh that p'int, ye needn't pluck me. Hyar I be in my glory."

"You've got inter a pooty scrape now, ain't ye?" mocked Saul, waving his torch near the prisoner's eyes.

"Ef you sez so, it gces that way," cheerfully answered Chris.

"You can't scare that young blade," said Locke, with a tinge of admiration in his voice.

"I'll make him howl like a whipped dog!" said Saul, with an oath. "D'ye know what ye're hyar fur, you spindle-shanked giraffe?"

"Cordin' ter 'pearances, I'm hyar ez a nat'ral curiosity, ter amuse ther multitude," coolly replied Chris. "Ef I'd known I was sech an a'traction, I'd a'plied fur a position with Barnum afore now."

"Oh! you've got a glib tongue, but I'll take ther ile off from it. I've seen sech tender shoots ez you afore."

Turk Tucker had led the horses away, and the three men now marched Chris further into the cave. At one corner a fire burned dimly, and this, with the torch, which was again thrust into a crevice in the wall, served to light the place.

Chris, who realized the danger but knew the importance of keeping cool, look keenly around, noting everything against a possible emergency, but made no comment.

"O' course I don't need ter interduce myself," said Saul, when they were at a standstill. "You remember me an' my pard, an' you prob'lly remember that I said I'd salivate ye fur depriving us o' ther gal."

"I b'lieve I do remember some casual remarks ter that effect," Chris acknowledged.

"I'll make ye remember, ef ye don't. It was a cold day fur us then, but ther frost nips t'other

ear now, an' you kin see ther result o' not mindin' yer own biz. Ther' ain't a better rule in life than—keep ter yerself."

"On ther hull, I reckon you're right," said Chris; "an' ef you say ther word, I'll slide off like a cockroach from a greased pig. I'm sorter sociable in my natur', but ef ye say keep ter yerself, why, I'm gone in a shake."

"You've had yer chance an' lost it. You wouldn't mind yer own business, an' now yer see ther result. We mean biz; ye won't never go out o' hyer alive!"

"That so?"

"Bet yer last dollar."

"I'm no gambrel man; I must respectfully decline ter bet," Chris answered.

"Wal, we'll give ye a taste o' our mettle right away. Locke, we'll show ye some red-hot fun. Be ye ready, Turk?"

"All ready," Tucker answered.

"Then ther fun begins. I ain't one o' them chaps that loses my deal by bein' too durned slow."

So saying, Saul shoved his prisoner up against the side of the cave, where it arose in a perpendicular wall, and bade him stand there. Then he stepped back.

"It's been a standin' dispute atween Turk an' me ez you're aware, Locke, ez ter which was ther best knife-thrower. Now, we're goin' ter settle ther p'int. We hev got a live target ter shoot at, an' we've agreed that the one who fu'st inflicts a mortal wond at this distance, by throwin' our knives, shall be ther boss. See?"

They did see, and, brave as Chris was, the idea of standing up and having knives flung at him, as though he was a captive of red Indians, was one which made him start perceptibly.

"Aha! I tho'rt you'd cry baby!" chuckled Saul.

"When you see my manly breast a-heavin' with sobs, you jest let me know," said Chris, sturdily. "I'm aware I'm in bad company, but 'tain't none o' my seekin'. You drive on yer mule-cart, an' I'll be 'round when ther dump is made!"

"D'ye see that spade over thar?"

"I do perceive it, Stout Saul."

"Wal, we're goin' ter dig yer grave with that, an' bury yer in ther cave. Nobody never'll know what become on ye."

"Jest plant a weepin' willow over me, will ye?" mildly suggested Chris.

"See here!" interrupted Locke, "this boy has too much 'sand' to go off in such a way. He ought—"

"He ought ter keep ter hisself!" gruffly interrupted Saul. "You hush up, Locke; I run this ambulance, an' I say ther ve-hi-cle ain't goin' home empty. Say no more. We're goin' ter shoot, an' shoot ter kill. Chris dies. Turk Tucker, be ye ready?"

"All ready."

"Then perceed!"

The two ruffians drew back to begin their sport, but their intended victim was not so ready to stand there and be carved up to satisfy their base desire for revenge. He saw that they were fully in earnest, and he knew the folly of appealing for mercy. He must either stand

still and be killed at their leisure, or help himself out of the fix.

He was resolved to make an attempt in this direction, but no one knew better than he that it would be one attended with little hope of success. He could not retreat toward the entrance to the cave, for Locke was in the way, while the interior of the place did not offer any great hope.

Still, it was his only chance, and he resolved to make the attempt.

We have said the light was given the place by a dim fire and a torch. Chris, studying the situation, had decided that if the latter was extinguished there would not be enough light to make the use of revolvers at all certain, and he laid his plans accordingly.

As his enemies drew he remained for a moment perfectly quiet. Then came a surprise for the roughs.

The Gold Bar Detective made a sudden leap and snatched the torch from the crevice, and then, uttering a yell which would have made an Indian wild with jealousy, he sprung straight at Saul and Turk, his torch held before him.

He could not have had a more effective weapon, as far as it went. Neither man nor beast can stand fire, and the desperadoes promptly took to their heels.

Chris glanced toward Locke, but as that person drew a revolver, he realized that, before he could reach him, there would be great danger of being shot down, so he promptly carried out his first idea.

He threw the torch after Saul, and then, wheeling, darted toward the interior of the cave.

When his two younger enemies recovered their wits a little they vented their wrath in no gentle terms, and Saul at once ordered a pursuit. The torch was caught up, revolvers drawn and the chase commenced.

"By ther great horn-spoon! I'll riddle him when I git my eyes on him!" declared Saul.

"You haven't got your eyes on him yet," said Locke, dryly.

"It's all yer fault that he escaped. Why didn't you shoot ther durned critter?"

"For one reason, because I didn't get my wits soon enough; in the next place, because I was reluctant to kill a mere boy like him."

"You're a calf, Jake Locke!"

"Look here, my young buck, you want to be a trifle careful in choosing your words. You are a bully, but you can't frighten me. Go slow, or I'll wipe the floor all up with you!"

Saul knew his companion well enough not to pick up the gauntlet, but he sullenly replied:

"Ef he escapes, you're in ther drag, too."

"I know I am, and for that reason I'll do my level best. He must be captured and held prisoner. I was a fool to agree to decoy him here; henceforth, I'll keep to myself."

During this conversation they had been hurrying in pursuit of Chris, but as the way became wild and broken they paused to listen. The fugitive had been wise enough to adopt the plan of going soft and slow, instead of plunging ahead without regard to anything, and all their efforts to locate him had proved unavailing.

When they listened, no sound was audible.

"By ther fiends! he's outwitted us!" said Saul. "He must have run like a deer," added Turk. "More likely he's hid somewhere," said Locke.

Saul started.

"I reckon we've got ter keep a double watch. Ef he war ter find ther gal, he'd git her out, too, ef sech a thing was possible. Ther young hound can't keep ter hisself."

Ard the three hurried on.

They had barely started when a small, sharp face arose above a boulder.

"Now, then, what's ther racket? About what gal did Saul o' Tarsus speechify? Hes he got one shet up hyar? 'Pearances indicates it b' mighty, an' I know he's jest mean enough fur that. I've had proof afore. C. King, ther way o' escape is now open ter you, but you're an ossifer o' law, an' ther chief o' ther Gold Bar Detective Bureau—ef thar's crookedness afoot, it's yer duty ter look inter it."

So saying, Chris moved softly after the three roughs.

He had but little fear of discovery; the cave was spacious and rocky, with numerous niches to which he could retreat should they turn at bay; and if he had possessed a revolver he would have felt comparatively at ease.

For about fifty yards he followed the three men, and then another dim light appeared. Saul approached this and seemed to look down.

"It's all right," he said. "She's still there!"

Who was therc? Chris felt a strong desire to know, and, reckless of the danger, he approached still closer. Then he looked and stood dumb with amazement as he recognized the face of Lulo Vaughan.

CHAPTER X.

THE GOLD BAR DETECTIVE BECOMES A CHAMPION.

THE Gold Bar Detective was very much astonished. It will be remembered that he left Gold Bar at an early hour that morning—before Lulo's disappearance was known—and, until he thus saw her face in the darkness, he had not for a moment suspected that she had been abducted again.

Yet here she was; he could make no mistake; and it was clear Strong Saul had in some way turned the tables.

Her prison proper was a pit in the earth, a natural rocky well, deep enough so that she could not ascend without help, and once there it had been safe enough to leave her unbound.

"Wal, I'll be chawed up fur a sa'ssage-dog if this hyar ain't qua'r," thought Chris. "What's ther whys an' whar'fores on't? She's been abductionized ag'in—"

He paused suddenly as Saul abruptly turned, and whisked behind a rock just in time to escape discovery.

"We must go on, boyees," said the leading rough. "Ef that young hound gets out o' hyar safe an' sound, he'll give ther secret o' ther cave dead away, an' we won't hev no refuge arter this. That won't do; we must find him an' give him a bullet that'll settle his hash!"

"Your bull-headed scheme is likely to get us into a pretty fix," said Locke, bitterly, as they retreated. "I wish I had never played the de-

coy for you. We've got to kill the boy now, to secure our safety."

The remainder of his remark was lost as he retreated.

"Ef I hev my way about it, thar won't be no slaughter o' innocents," remarked Chris, raising his head once more. "I ain't ready ter be salivated yet, not by a mile o' reasons; but I reckon that I've got ter git out o' this cave pooty quick, or thar'll be mournin' in the Gold Bar Detective Bureau."

He arose, started away, and then suddenly paused.

"Ther gal! I'd forgot her. By Ginal Jackson! I ain't goin' away an' leave her. She strikes meez bein' a clipper, an' ez a detective I can't leave her be. I'll 'vestigate."

He went to the top of the pit and looked down.

"I say, hullo, thar! I'm a rampagin' rescuer come fur ter git you out. Kin you inform me o' a way ter do it?"

Lulo had looked up quickly, and an expression of joy passed over her face.

"Chris!" she exclaimed.

"Sech is my title, reg'larly conferred by Yale College. But, mebbe—"

"Quick, Chris! There is a rope near you, somewhere; throw it down at once and help me out."

Chris had not known of the rope, but the fact that there was one stirred him to instant action, and he was not long in finding it and helping Lulo to the surface.

"Heaven bless you!" she said. "This is the second time you have come to my aid, and I can't find words sufficient to thank you—"

"Don't try jest now; we ain't got ther earth yet. When we're out o' ther woods, you kin holler. But I'm feerd we'll hev merry mischief in runnin' ther gantlet. we're hemmed in by ther innemy, an' not a wepon kin I boast."

"I have a revolver in my pocket, which they did not discover," said the girl, and she hurriedly drew a small caliber Smith & Wesson.

"Hurrah!" said Chris, with subdued excitement. "This hyar is the ticket; it places a new look on ther sit. Ther inemy had better keep ter themselves now."

He flourished the weapon, and felt as warlike as though he were a regiment of United States troops.

"Hush! they are returning!" said Lulo, suddenly.

"We're prepared to embrace 'em," said Chris, "but I ginerally choose my style fur a hug. Come this way, an' we'll try ter keep out o' sight."

They retreated to the deeper shadows, but, meeting with a solid wall of rock, were obliged to pause when altogether too near the enemy for safety.

Saul and Turk approached alone.

"He's gone inter ther furder part o' ther cave," said the former, "an' ef I's sure thar wasn't a hole fur him ter crawl out on, I'd let him go fur a while. At any rate, I'll go on alone, an' you kin stay hyar an' watch ther gal—Hullo!"

Strong Saul broke off abruptly; he had looked down into the pit.

"Gone!" he howled. "Ther little cuss hez been hyar so soon. Scatter, Turk Tucker, an' leave no stone unturned. I'll hev him ef I hev ter blow up ther durned cave; we mustn't lose ther money offered fur ther gal. I'll break that durned kid all ter pieces afore I git through with him!"

The speaker started out frantically, almost blindly, to keep his vow, but his course took him directly toward the young couple, and his ears were speedily greeted by the click of a revolver, followed by Chris's sharp voice:

"Halt, thar, and hands up! Keep ter yerself, or off goes yer wig!"

Saul answered with a roar. He was not in condition to use prudence, and he bounded forward like a mad bull. Once more Chris shouted a distinct warning, but it was unheeded, and he no longer had a choice in the matter. If he would save his own life he must use his revolver.

He pulled the trigger, and as the report sounded, accompanied by many an echo, Strong Saul suddenly stopped, swayed to and fro, and fell to the floor.

Chris realized that war was formally declared, and, with somewhat reckless enthusiasm, he sprung over the boulder and rushed at Turk Tucker.

The latter had the reputation of being a brave, hard fighter, but the fall of his pard had broken his heart, and he turned and fled toward the interior of the cave.

"Now's our time!" said Chris, seeing that Saul did not stir. "Thar's only one man nigh ther entrance, an' ef we move in warlike array we may be able ter pass ther portals O. K."

As they turned away Chris's foot struck against Saul's revolver which had fallen to the floor at the same time its master went down, and he placed it in his pocket and hurried on, followed by Lulo.

"You needn't feel skeered," he said, as he noticed that she was pale and frightened. "We are now two ter one, an' I'm a wild terror in a fight. You'll find me a good man ter tie to!"

"I have already seen that you are very brave," Miss Vaughan answered, "and I know you will do all you can. I am only a girl, though, and I confess I am terribly frightened."

"Gals an' men is diff'rent," said Chris, stroking his upper lip as though a mustache had suddenly sprung into existence, "an' it's our privilege ter defend your sex. Don't say nothin'; we're willin' ter do it, an' we're capable o' doin' it."

A faint smile hovered for a moment around Lulo's face, but it vanished as they neared the mouth of the cave. There they expected to find Locke on guard, and he had announced that his safety and that of his allies depended on forever silencing the boy.

The detective kept his eyes well open, but he did not see Locke so soon as he expected, and it soon became evident that if he was really on guard it must be at the very entrance itself.

The stamp of a horse's foot at the rear gave Chris an idea. They would need the animals if they succeeded in getting clear of the cave, and

a better chance than the present would never be offered.

Consequently, still keeping Lulo by his side, he went to the further side and found both his own horse and that lately bestrode by Locke. He remembered that this animal had proved stubborn on the bit, so he took it for himself and gave the girl the other.

"I don't know any better way than ter make a dash fur it," he then observed. "We can't play hide-an' seek with two horses in tow, an' Turk Tucker will git over his scare an' be around poooty soon. We'll mount an' make a dash an' ef Mister Locke don't keep ter hesself he must take ther quinseconce."

Lulo realized her own incapability of planning, so she yielded to his idea without argument, though she had an unpleasant consciousness that a stray bullet might end their careers.

They mounted and prepared for the dash.

"Now!" said Chris, sharply, as he gave each horse a blow.

There was a rattling of iron shoes on the rocky floor, a succession of sparks which flashed up at the collision, and they sped forward. Chris crouched over his horse's shoulders, and, revolver in hand, watched closely for Locke. War was formally declared, and their own lives were worth more to them than were the desperadoes'.

"Halt! Hold on, there, or I'll fire!"

The shout arose in the well-known voice of Locke, but it came from the rear, much to their surprise.

"Hurrah!" yelled Chris; "we're out o' ther drag. All's wal, an' ther goose is suspended 'way up."

Crack! crack!

Locke opened fire just as the fugitives were passing out of the den, but the bullets went wild and the noise served to frighten the horses to fresh speed.

"Hold hard!" yelled the Gold Bar Detective. "Keep yer grip an' ther earth is ounr!"

It was easier to say "keep your grip!" than to do it, as Lulo soon found, but she clung with the strength of desperation and they dashed on along the trail.

Suddenly a whistle rung out shrill and clear. The black horse erected his ears. It was repeated. Then the animal swung around on his heel, and Chris, remembering his former experience, knew it was a trained animal which was always ready to obey a signal. He tugged at the rein with all his strength. In vain.

Luckily, his wits did not desert him in this emergency, and he tore off his own jacket and threw it over the horse's head, doing all he could to muffle his ears, at the same time pulling on the right rein.

His artifice was successful; the animal yielded; and in a moment more they were again in flight.

"Jest keep yer eyes open, an' I'll play blind-man's buff with this quadruple," said Chris. "He's a tough sardine, from ther ground up, but he's got a cubic yard o' a cyclone on his back, an' ef ther hoss holds tergether we'll pull through all right. Hello! thar comes ther inemy ag'in!"

As he spoke a bullet whistled past, barely missing his head.

CHAPTER XI.

IRON IKE'S IRON GRIP.

"LET her howl!" shouted the Gold Bar Detective defiantly, as he turned his head for a moment. "I dunno but a man kin run down a hoss, but I opine he can't this week, an' along this road. Come an' see us, Locke; we're at home an' ther latch-string is out!"

"Don't anger them any more," advised Lulo.

"Bless your dear heart, they're full o' mad clean up to their chins, now, an' a leetle extra pressure 'll do em good. I like ter hev a fu'st-class blow-out when I go ter a circus."

Nothing could dampen the boy's spirits, and the fugitives swept along the trail at a rate of speed which soon left the pursuers in the rear. It was not until they had gone a mile, however, that they ventured to slacken their speed.

"We're out o' their drag now," said Chris cheerfully, "an' we'll amble on ter Gold Bar at our leisure."

"I don't want to go there," said Lulo, quickly.

"Don't ye? Allow me ter inquire ther reason."

"I believe they are all bad people there—nearly all. Judge Mendick betrayed me into the hands of my enemies."

"Eh? What?"

The girl repeated her assertion.

"Did ther old sinner do that? By Jinks! I didn't think it."

"He made me very welcome at his house, with outward show, but I am satisfied that he intended treachery all the time. I retired feeling that I had found a place of safety, but, about midnight, I was awakened by the house-keeper, Mrs. Schell, who informed me that my father was waiting for me below. I went down as soon as I was ready, and there I found Judge Mendick, Strong Saul and Turk Tucker. The judge was as cold and calm as an iceberg. He informed me that there had been a mistake, that the young roughs had meant all for the best, and that they would then conduct me to my father."

"Mendick's a lousy critter!" muttered Chris.

"I begged that he would send Tucker and the other man away, and when he refused I declined point-blank to accompany them. Then force was used, and I was compelled to go, and thus we left Gold Bar. We came directly here. It's no use for you to defend Mendick, for I know he hates me."

"When I defend him, you'll be able to see wings growin' out o' his ribs," said Chris. "Ther jedge is a nefarious desperader. Go back thar? Wal, I should smile not! I'll take ye direct ter Crescent Bend. Ye say yer dad is thar?"

"I received a letter purporting to be from him, and telling me to join him there, but I begin to doubt if he wrote any. I fear it was a forgery."

"Shouldn't be a-tall surprised; but what kin be old Mendick's reasons fur wantin' ye out o' ther way?"

"That is a mystery to me, but I have suspicion that he is at the bottom of it all."

"Twould be jest like him. He's a big gun on

wheels at Gold Bar, but I think he's a villain from ther ground up. Wal, we'll go at once ter Crescent Bend. Does yer father live thar reg'lar?"

"No. He is a wandering man, and has been ever since my mother died—goes from one mining-town to another, all the way from Yuma to Deadwood, which he can easily do, as he has a plentiful supply of money. When I received that letter I thought he had found a home where he was willing to settle, but I am all at sea now."

"So be I, on that p'int," Chris admitted, "but we'll go on ter ther Bend an' see what we kin l'arn. I hereby take ye officially under my protection till ther secret is dissolved, an' you kin jest bet yer last bit I'll keep yer inemies at a distance. When I git mad I'm wuss than a can o' dynamite under ther czar's fire-place, an' I'll show it, too, ef thar's further crooked work ag'in' ye."

And they rode on toward Crescent Bend.

Let us now return to Iron Ike, The Solid Man from Slow-Coach, whom we left under the knee and hand of Judge Mendick, and in a fair way to be wiped off the earthly roll-call in a hurry. Ike was the stronger man of the two, but the difference was not great, and he had been taken at such a disadvantage that the judge had everything his own way.

But the best-laid plans of men often fall through.

Just at this critical moment the door opened and Ralph Mendick entered. Neither of the men saw or heard him, and he stood amazed at the extraordinary spectacle. It was one which, though he could not tell the cause, spoke so strongly of murder, that he lost but little time before springing forward to grasp his father's arm.

"In Heaven's name, what does this mean?" he cried.

The judge's hands relaxed, and he turned a ghastly face upward. It was as though he had been discovered by an officer who would surely drag him away to justice.

Iron Ike was not the man to lose a chance, and as his choking had not progressed far enough to impair his mental or physical faculties, he made a quick motion, shoved the judge aside and arose to his feet.

The three stood facing each other in momentary silence; then the Solid Man laughed harshly.

"You interrupted quite a picnic, boy, an' yer kin bet your life your honored parent won't thank you fur it."

Ralph saw that his father was incapable of coherent speech, and his anger turned against the stranger.

"Give an account of yourself, sir, or I will have you arrested at once!" he exclaimed.

Again Iron Ike laughed—this time mockingly.

"Wal, I should smile! Why, thar ain't men enough in Gold Bar ter hold Ther Solid Man o' Slow-Coach when he gits his back up, an' yer kin wager yer skulp yer dad won't back ye up in yer game. Ther only ossifer he would want should arrest me would be Death."

"We will see whether you are to come into our house and act the part of a bravo!" exclaimed Ralph, and he sprung to the window and raised the lower sash.

Another moment and his voice would have sounded the alarm, but the judge sprung forward and grasped his arm.

"No, no!" he cried; "do not call—do not let any one know we are here."

"But, father—"

"Obey me in this, I implore you!"

Mendick had never before spoken to him in such a pleading, helpless way.

"I told you so," said Iron Ike, with his old laugh. "You see thar are times when outsiders had better keep ter themselves, an' this is one o' them. We don't want no one b'ilin' in, do we jedge?"

There was a disagreeable, wolfish look on the man's face as he turned to Mendick, for there were still red marks on his neck and a pain in his throat. He would never forgive that assault, and if Mendick was really in a hard spot he had made his situation ten times worse by angering the Solid Man.

"Shut the window, Ralph, and let no one in," the father added, as he dropped heavily into a chair.

The youth obeyed, acting like one in a dream. He knew his father's old imperious way, and the fact that a stranger and enemy was in the house and that the judge would not have a call made for aid, indicated that there was a weak spot in the great man's armor.

Ralph's face bore a troubled look, which Iron Ike did not fail to see.

"Live an' l'arn, boyee," he said, coolly. "You think this old rascal is an angel, but you'll find out diff'rent afore ther crush is over. I know him better than you, an'—"

"Forbear!" said Mendick, hoarsely.

"Forbear nothin'!" Ike retorted. "I'm hyar fur biz, an' biz is all my cry. You know what I want. Tell me whar Warren Elwood's son is or I'll spit out ther hull story ter this young feller. You hear me?"

Mendick had never been paler.

"Give me time, and I'll do my best," he urged.

"Time is jest what I won't give ye. You know whar ther boyee is, an' I'm goin' ter know, too. Spit it out, or ther secret goes a-flyin' wharever thar's ears ter listen."

"How can I tell what I don't know?"

"I ain't hyar ter answer conundrums, but I'll tell you one thing—I can tell what I do know!"

"Believe me, I will do all that money can do, and bend every effort to satisfy your wish. Can you ask more?"

"You're a wily rat, Si Mendick, but you can't pull ther wool over my eyes. You had yer hands on my throat awhile ago an' was strangling me, but ther scene hez changed; now I've got my hands on your heart, an' you'll find my grip is an iron one!"

"You lose your last chance by being bull-headed," said the judge, sullenly; "I tell you that fairly. But I can't tell you what you want to know. I don't know where the person you want is, but I have the clew to the riddle, and

by following it up I'll learn all and give you the benefit of my investigation."

The Solid Man looked at the speaker as though he would read his thoughts.

"Wal, I'll give ye a show, but ye had better bewar' how yer try ter play ther roots on me. Ef you're stavin' ther business off, thinkin' ter git ther best o' me, I tell ye fa'rly it won't work. Once ter-night ye got yer grip on my throat, but you only opened my eyes; you'll never do it ag'in."

"I am not trying to gain useless time, nor do I meditate any trick, for—"

"That's enough. Cut, an' come ag'in. I'm no hog an' I don't want ther earth, but you know what I do want, an' I'm goin' ter hev it. Ketch on? Now, I'm goin'; I'll leave yer ter think it over; but jest you b'ar in mind that I'm rank ole business, an' you know what you'll git if you kick. So-long!"

The Solid Man moved toward the door and took his leave without another word.

Ralph looked at his father in wonder and trouble.

"What does it all mean?" he asked.

"Ask me no questions now—not one," said the elder man. "Follow this fellow and see that he leaves the house, and then go to your room. At least, leave me alone. Go! go!"

And he shoved the youth gently but firmly out of the room and locked the door after him.

"It has come at last!" he then muttered. "Murder will out, and I've got to face the grim shadow of the past. Face it? ha! ha! Well, I will; I'll face it, and woe to those who are against me. I'll win, or I'll make tombstones thicker than citizens in Gold Bar!"

CHAPTER XII.

OLD LEATHER'S LETTER.

THE following morning Detective Chris rode into Gold Bar and returned the horse he had hired, after which he walked slowly homeward.

"Now, then, C. King, Esquire, you've got work ter do," he observed. "Ther Gold Bar Detective Bureau is gettin' more an' more business on its hands, an' it'll get squeezed in ther crowd ef it don't get in its work on some o' its cases right soon. Fu'stly, we want ter know who was ther skellington found under ther river, an' who extinguished him. Secondly, we want ter diskiver who is ther enemy o' Lulo Vaughan, an' where her parient really is. Which eend ter begin at is a profound conundrum you must grapple with, C. King."

He was passing the post-office when he was hailed by the presiding officer of that place.

"I say, Chris, what is Old Leather's real name?"

"Thar's whar you've stuck me. It might be Smith, Jones or Chopyerheadoff, for all I know," Chris admitted.

"Ain't it Hanshaw?"

"Can't say. He hez never divulged ter me."

"Well, I think it is, and as here's a letter for Joseph S. Hanshaw, I wish you'd take it over and ask him."

"Jest ez you say, fur, though I hev always considered it dangerous ter meddle with ther U. S. mail, I s'pose it's all right when ther P. M. sez so. Yas, I'll ax him."

He resumed his walk, but had gone only a short distance further when he suddenly encountered Judge Mendick.

"You're just the person I wished to see," said the latter.

"Be I? Wal, you do me proud," said Chris, keeping his eye warily upon the man.

"I wish to reason with you about that knife."

"Which knife?"

"The one you found in the river."

"Oh! Wal, I'd nigh forgot all about it. I don't find it nowhar about me, an' I reckon I've either lost it or left it at Old Leather's cabin."

"Is that a fact?" asked Mendick, looking at him keenly.

"Pears so, from what I sez. I hope 'tain't lost, fur I was thinkin' o' presentin' it to ther John Smith Institute, of Washington, D. C."

"Boy, you're lying to me!" the judge sharply said.

"That's all right, boss, but arter I git ter be eighteen years old I'm goin' ter thrash every bipid that sez that ter me. I don't approve o' juvenile pugilists, or I'd go in now an' play Hail Columby on yer cocoanut."

"Enough of this. You are altogether too insolent. I desired to arrive at an amicable understanding with you, but I see it is impossible, and I shall be obliged to chastise you, I fear. For the last time, will you give up that knife?"

"Jedge, I'd like ter oblige you; I would, b'mighty; but ther case don't admit on't. Ther knife is not in my possession, an' I can't stand an' deliver. Hows'ever, ef you kin find it, you're at liberty ter grapple on, ez ther cheese said ter ther rat."

This was altogether too much for Mendick's temper, and he made a rush for the boy. Chris stood still until he was almost at hand, and then, with a skillful dive, he shot under his arm, and stood laughing on the other side. His laugh vanished, however, when another pair of arms were wrapped about him, and he looked around and saw the face of a stout Chinaman.

The latter he recognized as Quong Ho, the porter of the judge's store, and it was clear he was there as Mendick's helper in all he wished to do.

"Hold him!" exclaimed the judge. "Keep a fast grip on him, Quong Ho."

"Me gotee him, all samee," the heathen answered.

"You'll gitee blowed ter Dynamite Corner, ef you don't leave go, you chin-chin rat-catcher!" exclaimed Chris, struggling frantically. "See yer', jedge, jest you keep away or thar'll be a vacant chair 'round hyar somewhar!"

Mendick was hurriedly advancing.

"I'm going to search you, you young scoundrel!" he said, with an air of determination.

Chris had concealed the knife elsewhere, and there was nothing for Mendick to find, but the boy objected to such treatment on general grounds, and when his enemy came near he received a kick on the arm that he extended which made him roar.

"You keep yer distance, or thar'll be a collision atween the sun an' 'arth," Chris cautioned. "I'm answerable ter law an' jestice fur all I do, but not ter you. Keep ter yerself, or off goes yer sombrero!"

"Hold his legs, Quong Ho," Mendick directed. "Better hire a boy ter do it," said Chris, nearly squirming away.

"You kleepee still!" ordered the Chinaman, "else me tlakee you 'closs my knee likee small boys should be took."

"Oh! you audacious heathen! it's a wonder ther mere mention on't don't bu'st ye. Me, me, a free-born American citizen be took that way—Hi! keep off!"

Mendick had again advanced, and as Chris's wrath arose to the boiling point, he made such a desperate effort that he broke Quong's hold. A moment they were mixed up in a tangle, and then the Chinaman went over on his back, both hands pressed to his stomach.

His fall, however, left a clear field for the judge, who had been watching for an opening, and he rushed forward.

Chris, however, knew that he was no match for him in point of strength, and he adopted the only way he could see just then. He made a dive and shot between Mendick's legs, and though he made the passage safely, the shock threw his enemy flat beside his Chinese follower.

The shock was a considerable one, and he arose, but slowly, though he was in time to see that Chris had made good his retreat. Quong Ho was still rolling forlornly on the ground, groaning dismally.

"Silence, you fool!" Mendick ordered.

"Oh! me welly sick manee. Earthquake strikee me in stomjacee, an' knock bleath all outee blody."

"It's a pity it didn't knock out what few brains you have. Hang it! why did you let that boy go?"

"Gitee p'leece an' have himee 'lested."

"Arrest your grandfather!" snapped the judge. "I find the people like him too well. If there was cause to arrest him I'd do it; bet your life on that. But there isn't, and he's got the dead-wood on me. I'd wring his neck if I dared!"

At that moment Chris was nearing Old Leather's cabin, whistling cheerfully, and he walked in with as careless an air as though he had been away but an hour.

"How's peggin', ter-day?"

Old Leather looked up surlily. He had once thought Chris a smart and promising boy, but since he was taken by the hair and rolled over on the floor his views had changed.

"Peggin's wal enough."

"That's good. I like ter see a cheerful outlook in ther sole department. By ther way, I b'lieve your name is Joseph S. Hanshaw, ain't it?"

The cobbler looked up in surly surprise.

"Wal, what on't?" he asked.

"If 'tain't, nothin'; if 'tis, I've got a letter fur you."

"A letter fur me? I guess not. I ain't had one fur twenty years. What's more, I never expect one."

"Still, hyer's one fur Joe Hanshaw. Ef him ain't you, I'll take it back ter ther P. O. Department."

"That's me," Old Leather admitted; and he laid down his hammer and took the letter.

He opened it slowly and clumsily, and looked at the sheet of paper inside with an air which speedily betrayed the fact that he could not read. Chris asked if he should act as an interpreter. Old Leather's gaze was quickly and suspiciously raised to his face.

"No!" he surlily declared. "I'm able ter tak car' o' my own letters, I reckon."

"Hope thar ain't no sickness in yer fambly?"

"It's none o' yer business whether thar is or not," the cobbler declared, as he put the letter carefully away in his pocket.

Chris let the matter drop, but he did not forget it. There was a new expression on Old Leather's face, and the boy suspected he was afraid of the letter. That he had been unable to read it Chris was positive, while if he was a book honest man he would not be afraid to have As his room-mate do so.

"Old Leather's a crooked one," was Chris's verdict. "I'd give a dollar, myself, to know what ther letter says—it's a-worryint, an' him, anyhow. But ef he can't trust me, how' Old he goin' ter know its contents? Who kin he trust? I'll watch an' see."

Resolved to carry out this idea, the boy soon left the shanty and, going a little apart, laid down where he could watch the door, but the cobbler did not at once come out.

The day passed without event of importance and the Gold Bar Detective found that people were losing interest in the skeleton found under the river. It had created quite a ripple, at first, but when it was buried it was the old story of "out of sight, out of mind," and some of them were ready to laugh at the idea of murder advanced by the boy.

All scouted the idea of any developments in the case.

Chris, however, kept his eyes open, and he was so sure that Old Leather would that evenin seek some one to read his letter, that he resumed his secret watch as soon as it was dark. He was not disappointed. The cobbler soon came out and started down the street, and Chris followed cautiously. It was well he used precaution, for the old man seemed to fear pursuit and frequently looked around, but the young detective was not to be caught.

"Thunder an' beeswax!" Chris breathed the words when he saw Old Leather pause at Judge Mendick's door and rapped for admission.

"So ther judge is ther man he feels that he kin trust, is he? How's this? I never knowed ther two men ter speak—Now, hole on, hole on; an idee begins ter percolate through me head. Thar war a skeleton found under the river. I 'spect it was that o' a man name Elwood. I also 'spicion that both Mendick an' Old Leather know more about Elwood than the will tell. Now, ther one goes ter ther other to hev a letter read. Result, ther judge is the only man O. L. kin trust. Why? It must be because he knows so much about him that he ain't afeerd ter hev him know more!"

This conclusion arrived at, Chris grew anxious to get a look into Mendick's house. He saw light in the judge's private room and suspected Old Leather would be conducted there.

"It's a nefarious projector," he thought, but I'm a-goin' ter hev a look inter that same oom!"

CHAPTER XIII.

NEW TROUBLE FOR THE YOUNG DETECTIVE. WHEN the Gold Bar Detective made a resolution he was not long in seeking to carry it out, and he hastened away to where he knew there was a ladder. With this he soon returned and, setting it up against the wall, mounted toward the window of the judge's room.

On reaching the level his first glance showed him that the window was not only closed but fastened, and his hopes of hearing anything at once vanished. His means of observation were one too good, either, but there was a small crevice at the bottom, where the curtain was not pulled entirely down, where he managed to look inside.

As he had expected, he saw Mendick and Old Leather, and the former held a paper in his hand which was undoubtedly the cobbler's letter. He seemed to have just finished reading it, and the two were talking earnestly.

Old Leather's face bore an anxious look, but Mendick did not seem to share his fears, and Chris soon came to the conclusion that the letter was not important. He was also shrewd enough to suspect that his landlord's only cause for fear was the fact that he had received a letter at all, after having been almost lost to the sight of men under his real name.

The spy was very much annoyed because he could not overhear what was being said, for he felt sure it would prove of interest, and there was that about the men's manner which confirmed his suspicion that they had at one time known each other better than casual appearances would seem to indicate.

He was still watching when a voice sounded just below him.

"Hallo, there!"

Chris started and looked down, and he saw Ralph standing at the foot of the ladder. At the same moment a well known click broke the silence.

"Surrender, or I fire!" young Mendick added. "Prancin' thunder! I'm bottled up!" thought Chris, with some dismay, but another thought followed: Ralph's a good feller; I reckon ef I open his blinkers a bit he'll not only let me go, it will think less o' his precious dad. I know he's interested in Lulo Vaughan—"

"Come, hurry up!" ordered Ralph.

"I reckon you mean hurry down," said Chris, jolly, "an' you perceive that I'm a-comin' ith all possible speed an' endurance."

"Chris!" Ralph exclaimed.

"I'm that same gopher."

"I didn't think this of you."

"Didn't think what o' me?"

"That you would descend so low as this."

"I didn't descend low; I ascended high," actually corrected Chris.

"This evasion will do you no good," said Ralph, sternly. "I have caught you in the very act of attempting to enter the house secretly, and there is but one interpretation for the et."

"What's that?"

"Burglary! I am very sorry for this, Chris, for I have always thought well of you. What could drive you to such an act?"

"S'pose we stick a pin thar an' begin over ag'in," coolly suggested Chris. "You were never made fur a joodicial character, my frien'. I'll trouble you ter obsarve that thar's a light in that room. Ther jedge is thar, too. D'y'e s'pose I'd burglarize the ranch at such a time?"

The argument had due effect on Ralph.

"But what were you doing?" he asked.

"Ef you'll take ther trouble ter climb up thar, you kin see fur yerself that my side-pard, Old Leather, is thar. O. L. is a foxy blade, an' needs watchin', an' I hev my eye on him a good 'eal. Shall I tell you why?"

"Yes, but not here. I am convinced that I have wronged you, and I earnestly ask your pardon. Let us go away where we will be safe. If you are through, we'll remove the ladder."

It was done, and the two were soon engaged in conversation, but Ralph did not wait for Chris to open.

"I have a few questions to ask you," he abruptly said. "You remember Lulo Vaughan?"

"A few," Chris acknowledged.

"Where do you suppose she is? What is the mystery of her disappearance?"

"What's your theory?"

"I am puzzled and all at sea. The case has a dark aspect which troubles me. I can't get rid of the belief that she has again fallen into the hands of her enemies, and that some member of my father's house was knowing to her removal."

"What ef ye found it ter be so?"

"Then that person becomes my enemy," said Ralph, in a ringing voice.

"S'pose that one was yer parient?"

"Even then, my remark holds good."

Chris shifted his weight from one foot to the other and scratched his head awhile before answering.

"Wal, yer s'pishion is correct. I've see'd ther gal sence; I've did battle fur her, ez Don Quixote did fu-fur— Never mind; she's now safe, but it ain't no thanks ter your parient. He delivered her inter ther hands o' ther Philistines, an' it nigh about proved a fatal deliver."

"Are you in earnest? Did my father really do this?"

"So Lulo told me," Chris answered, and then he gave a brief sketch of his adventures on the mountain, as well as a careful repetition of what Miss Vaughan had said about her compulsory departure from the judge's house.

"My suspicions are confirmed," said Ralph, in an unsteady voice. "I have tried to believe my father innocent, but I felt positive some one in the house was knowing to her departure. What can have been his object?"

"That's jest what I want ter know," answered Chris. "Kin your parient know Lulo's father?"

"I never heard the name until I saw the girl, and I am all at sea. I am glad I know the truth at last, and I shall not let the matter rest here. In this world a man is a mean wretch if he is not honorable, and because I find my father tripping, I am not going to silently ac-

quiesce in his nefarious work by remaining a stick. I'll know the truth if I can."

He spoke firmly, and Chris shook his hand with warmth.

"You're a man arter my own heart, an' I'm glad ter see ye take sech a stand. You're a credit ter the hooman species."

The two friends then grappled with and tried to solve the mystery, but this was not so easily done. Neither could see a reason why Judge Mendick should be Lulo Vaughan's enemy. On one point they were agreed, however—there was a secret which it would pay them to know. It was an hour later when they separated and each went his way. No conclusion had been arrived at, but they had agreed that both should watch, and then compare notes.

"It would be more'n he bargains fur ef he should prove that his parient killed Warren Elwood," thought Chris; "but I reckon sech a thing ain't probable."

He was moving toward the Delta Saloon when two men suddenly sprung out from behind a cabin and seized him.

Chris was about as quick as any one could be, usually, but he was taken off his guard, and the men moved so expeditiously that, before he could even utter a cry for help, his mouth was muffled and his hands tied behind him.

Then he was deliberately "run out" of the town, in a double sense.

At that pace it did not take long to pass the village, and they were soon moving toward higher ground.

Chris had already recognized his captors, and he knew he was in the worst kind of a fix. They were Turk Tucker and Locke, and he needed no words to convlince him there was murder in their hearts.

Not until a mile had been traveled did they pause. When they did it was in a sandy gulch, and he knew it was one of the loneliest localities anywhere near Gold Bar.

The bandage was removed from his mouth.

"I s'pose ye know us," Tucker said.

"My eyes are pooty good fur one o' my advanced age, an' I do re-cog-nize yer bloomin' faces," replied the young detective, as coolly as ever.

"D'ye know why ye're here?"

"'Cause I can't help it."

"Strong Saul is dead!"

"So is Strong Samson."

"You miserable leetle whelp, ye needn't think yer smartness will save ye! You killed our pard, an' we're goin' ter give ye like for like. You hev only yerself ter thank fur it. Ef ye had kept ter yerself, ye'd hev been all right, but ye had ter b'ile in whar ye had no call, an' ye see ther result."

"We won't argue ther pros nor corns," said Chris, evenly, "but ef Saul o' Tarsus has gone over ther devide, it's all his own fault. Them ez let me alone git along all right, but I'm rank p'izen an' a red rattlesnake with nineteen rattles when I'm merlested. I tell ye that fairly."

"Why do you waste words?" broke in Locke, impatiently. "I know this boy well enough to be sure he will not budge a hair. Death has no terrors for him. The long and short of it is, we

are going to take a tooth for a tooth and kill you. That's why you are kidnapped."

"I admire yer frankness, but ther abduction-izing part ain't agreeable," said Chris, calmly. "I shall engage counsel, look fur a flaw in ther indictment an' move fur a new trial."

"You can have that in the next world."

"I'm afeered not, fur you wouldn't be admitted ez a prosecutor. Your testimony would be throwed out."

"I am not going to waste any words," said Locke, angrily. "Your tongue is sharper than a file. Lead him this way, Turk."

The order was obeyed, and Chris was conducted several yards further down the gulch. When they paused it was at a place where the sandy soil had been thrown' back and a pit of oblong shape excavated.

"Do you see this hyar?" Turk asked.

"I reckon."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Looks like a hole in the ground."

"It's yer grave!"

"Go 'way!" said Chris, contemptuously. "D'ye suppose I'll own a one-horse concern like that? Whar's ther moniment, an' ther—"

"Words are useless," sternly interrupted Locke. "I warned you we were going to kill you, and so we are. Here in this gulch you die, and in this grave we shall bury you."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE GREATEST PERIL OF CHRIS'S LIFE.

It would be an error to say that the Detective Bureau President Chris was not a good deal troubled. He knew his enemies were men who would not hesitate at anything, and they had what they considered good reasons for their hatred. Strong Saul was dead, and though he had died as the fool dieth, they laid all the blame to Chris.

The boy realized his danger, but his mind remained active. As he afterward said, he "had too much ter think about ter be a great deal skeered." Had his hands been at liberty he would certainly have made an effort to turn the scale; but as it was, he seemed wholly helpless.

"I s'pose I orter be duly grateful fur yer promise ter bury me, ez it's mighty unpleasant fur a *diseased* person ter lay around loose; but ef you'll give me charge o' affairs I'll save yer expense. It costs up'ards o' a hundred dollars ter give a man a *stylish* funeral."

"All the expense we shall undergo will be the use of a spade for a few minutes."

"You thought ye did a mighty nice thing when you shot Strong Saul, didn't ye?" broke in Turk, bitterly.

"Ef he'd kept ter hisself he'd lived ter been a grandparient, fur all o' me, but when he went ter slashin' around on my toes, my corns jest riz up an' cried fur gore. Be I a stick or a stun ter be whanged around that-a-way?"

"We will not argue the case, for it would be a waste of time," said Locke, curtly. "We have settled this matter, and the sooner it is over the better. Kneel down!"

"What fur?"

"Kneel!"

Locke grasped the youth and forced him to his knees, but Chris was by no means resigned to his fate. He promptly dropped lower, rolled upon his back, drew up his knees like a flash, and sent out his feet directly toward Locke's stomach.

The whole maneuver was executed so quickly that the man could not get out of the way, and in a moment more he was knocked backward as though hit by a battering-ram. His heels struck the loose earth, and then he fell sprawling upon the ground.

He was still there when Chris bounded up, and, lowering his head, made a dash for Turk Tucker.

The latter had his revolver, but he forgot to use it, and he barely escaped the rush. When he did, he recovered his balance as soon as possible and sprung forward to seize Chris, but the latter knew the importance of forcing the fight while he had a chance, and he was dashing into close quarters in the same style as before.

Turk's better way would have been to avoid him, but he was angry at the thought of being driven by so small a customer as Chris, and, as before said, he resolved to seize him.

The two came together with a tremendous shock, and, very much to Turk's surprise, his extended hands proved a weak guard. Chris came between them, and then it seemed to Turk that an avalanche, or something of that sort, hit him in the stomach. He went over helplessly, and Chris saved himself from a fall by his usual quickness.

But the delay had been fatal to his chances.

Just as he was about to take to his heels a pair of strong arms encircled his body, and Locke's voice hissed:

"That's enough, you young hound! You've had your racket, but I'll show you it won't hold water."

Chris struggled in vain; he could not break that hold; and Turk came to time with a series of remarks too profane for repetition.

"He's worse than a tiger-cat," said Locke, "and the sooner we get this job over the better. He don't play that game again. Get your revolver ready, and when I give the word blaze away without more delay."

"You're a set o' sneakin' hulks; durn my boots ef you ain't!" commented Chris. "Hadn't you dare ter give a small kid a show? Unstring my hands, an' I'll fight ye both an' enjoy it."

"We shall do nothing of the kind. We have seen enough of you and your ways; if it'll be of any consolation to you, I'll say I'd rather fight a common man. You should have been a tiger. Come, Turk, wrastle around and get down to work."

Once more the Gold Bar Detective was forced down upon his knees, and as Locke kept a fast hold upon him, he had no chance for escape. It looked as though he was doomed to die in that lonely gulch, and be buried in the sand where no one, except the murderers, would ever know his fate, and, for once, his tongue lost its lightness.

He showed no cowardly fear; he did not even make a plea for mercy; but he realized that it was a solemn thing to give up his hold on life,

and he certainly had not had anywhere near the length of time allotted to man.

Turk Tucker cocked his revolver, and the end seemed very near, but the unexpected often happens, and affairs suddenly took a new turn.

"Hands up! The man who stirs dies at my hand!"

It was a new voice sharply sounding from a point behind the assassins, and as they wheeled, they saw a man standing there in the bright moonlight, with two revolvers bearing full upon them.

It was Iron Ike, The Solid Man from Slow-Coach.

"I mean business," he added, in the same tone. "Hands up!"

There was an underlying menace which they were not mad enough to defy, and Turk lacked the courage to try a snap-shot. Both men obeyed.

"Stay whar you are," he added. "Chris, go to them an' get their weepons. Hello your hands are tied an' you can't. Come here!"

Chris went, and the Solid Man cut his bonds, at the same time keeping a close watch of the two roughs.

"What the fiends does this mean?" blustered Locke. "I warn you that you'd better keep to yourself."

"Your opinion don't count fur rotten eggs in this court," said he, coolly. "You're so mean ye p'izon ther air 'round where ye stand."

"Let us alone or I'll murder you!"

"Oh, you hush your cackle! I don't keer one snap fur it, an' ez yer voice ain't no ways melodious, I won't hear it furder. Ther tables is turned, an' I'm goin' ter feed ye on yer own fodder. You thought it was nice an' manly ter bulldoze a boy, but that boy is bound ter come ter ther top o' ther heap ev'ry day in ther year. Git the'r weepons, Chris."

Chris obeyed, and the roughs were rendered wholly helpless. They were full of wrath, but neither had the courage which had kept Chris up in his time of trial. They dared not defy the ready revolvers of the Solid Man.

"Thar they be," observed Chris. "Look like a pair o' plucked turkeys, all ready fur market, don't they? Nobody wouldn't think now that they was onc't bold assassinators. I'm afeerd, gents, my grave will be lonely afore I move in."

"Ef jestice was done," said Iron Ike, in a voice which vibrated with anger, "those wretches would occupy it their own selves, but I ain't ther man to shoot 'em in sech a way. I kin kill a wolf, but not a skunk. We will take them to Gold Bar an' see what jestice kin do fur them thar."

The faces of the prisoners brightened perceptibly, but in the moonlight the change passed unheeded.

"You'd better let us go," said Turk. "I'm a rambunctious tiger when I'm down on a man, an'—"

"Oh, cut it short!" said the Solid Man, indifferently. "I'm not in the least afeerd o' yer. I know yer ways. When you've got a boy ter misuse you're ther chief o' Tecumseh Holler, I plainly see, but yer 'sand' peters out when a man stands up afore ye. Now, turn yer faces down ther gulch an' amble. Ef ye try ter cut

an' run, I'll increase yer weight by a half-ounce o' lead. You hear me?"

They *did* hear him, and it was in a manner as meek as that of a cow that they obeyed his order. The return to Gold Bar was begun, with the prisoners in front, and Ike and Chris closely following.

"Ther ways o' ther world is strange," said Chris. "One moment we is up; ther next we is down; an' then thar's another revolution, an' we don't know which side up we'll land. Hyar-after, I'm goin' ter carry an obituary notice in my pocket, an' ef I git wound up I kin git due credit in ther daily papers. Thar is some facts not ginerally knowed ter ther public, an' it makes a man mad ter read ther notice o' his decease, an' see errors in it which he can't correct, 'cause o' a lack o' telegram communications whar he's gone ter."

The irrepressible boy talked on steadily, and seemed to have entirely recovered from his rough experience, and though Iron Ike made few comments, he could not help thinking that the youth had a nature which would make him the one man in a thousand.

Gold Bar was reached in due time, but when the Solid Man called on the citizens for officers and a jail, they were at first a good deal at sea. Never since the place was started had they had either. Still, the fact that the life of Chris, the favorite of all, had been attempted, stirred up a general rush of feeling against the prisoners, and a place was soon improvised, guards selected, and the men put where they were not likely to escape at once.

Iron Ike superintended everything, and when it was over looked for Chris, with whom he wished to have a serious talk, but the boy had gone away with some of his friends.

Consequently, the Solid Man decided to look him up and at once proceeded to do so. Had he remained at the jail it would have been far better for the interests of justice.

Turk Tucker had kept his eyes open, and when he saw that Ike was out of the way he turned to one of the guards.

"Who's yer foremost citizens?" he asked.

"Jedge Mendick takes that place by long odds," was the proud reply.

"Then send fur him."

"Eh?"

"Send word ter him that I want ter see him."

The guard sneered and declined, but Turk was in earnest and he soon made it understood. The guard became mad, and, thinking the interview would only show the prisoner still more plainly that he was in a fix from which he could not escape, he decided to obey.

It was less than half an hour later when Mendick appeared. He looked worried and nervous, but, without a word to his subordinates, went at once to the prisoner.

CHAPTER XV.

TURK TUCKER'S FRIEND.

THE faces of the prisoners brightened at sight of the judge, but the look was not reciprocated. On the contrary, the great man would have been delighted had he heard that both men had just dropped dead with heart-disease.

He closed the door behind him and looked at them with a scowl.

"Glad ter see ye, jedge," said Turk, with a grin.

"I can't reciprocate," growled Mendick. "What the fiend do you mean by getting into such a scrape?"

"Couldn't help it. You kin bet yer boots we don't like it any more'n you do."

"Why did you try to kill that boy?"

"Self-defense—"

"Nonsense! Speak to the point, and truthfully, if truth is in you."

"Wal, he salivated Strong Saul, an' we was a-trivin' fur vengeance."

"Is Saul really dead?"

"He is that, an' ther boy did it."

"He died like a fool," interrupted Locke. "Chris wounded him, but the injury was one from which he would have recovered in two weeks only for his own folly. When he learned that the boy had escaped he just went wild—flew into such a fit of passion that he burst a blood-vessel and died."

"It's all one," said Turk, doggedly. "Ther young devil wounded him, and that's why he went over ther divide."

"Enough of useless talk," said Mendick, coldly. "What do you want of me?"

"What do we want o' you? Wal, I reckon we want you ter get us out o' this scrape."

"You had no business to get into it."

"D'ye s'pose we walked in on purpose?"

"Well, what have I got to do with it, anyway? You were not in my service at the time; you endeavored, as you confess, to satisfy your own desires for revenge, and this is the result. Did I have any part in the affair?"

Mendick spoke coldly, and it was clear he intended to rebuff them if he could, but neither of them had any fear of that. They knew the ground that was under their feet and his.

"We thought ye might be willin' ter do somethin' fur old times' sake," said Turk.

"Well, I can't; you must rely on yourselves. There is a strong feeling against you, and for me to raise my voice in your behalf would not only do no good, but it would plainly reveal the fact that I had an interested motive, and ruin me. Since I can do you no good, I may as well keep to myself."

"Wal, I'm glad we've got your voice in the matter, fur we kin now speak plain. Ther help we want ain't open aid, but we do want ye ter contrive some way fur us ter go free afore mornin'. You kin do this, an' ef you don't we shall open our mouths an' tell folks jest who is at ther bottom o' all this funny business. We wouldn't hav had no spite ag'in' Chris ef ye hadn't hired us ter steal ther gal, Lulo Vaughan."

The judge had expected just this danger, and his mouth closed tightly.

"Do you suppose the people would believe your word against mine?" he finally asked.

"Ef they don't, we will say that Chris knows whar ther gal is, an' they hev only ter find her ter prove that you delivered her inter our hands arter she went ter your house."

Mendick was cornered, and he knew it. He remained silent for a moment, digging his heel viciously into the floor, and then replied;

"You seem to think I can easily free you, but I am not so sure of it. Some cunning trick must be used or all is lost, and discovery means ruin to me. I will, however, try to release you on one condition."

"What's that?"

"The man who brought you into Gold Bar—Iron Ike, he calls himself—is my deadly enemy. I would give some money to know he is dead. I will attempt your release on condition that, before you leave Gold Bar, you will put him out of the way."

"Never ter return?"

"Exactly."

"Jedge, you're a brick. We'll do it!"

"I have two revolvers with me, and I'll give one to each of you, but beware how you use them until you are clear of the jail. To use them here would be to wholly betray me."

"You kin depend on us."

It was five minutes later when Mendick left the place, and at that time the Solid Man had not returned.

Iron Ike went to Old Leather's cabin, but he failed to find the Gold Bar Detective there, and he sauntered back to the center of the village in a thoughtful mood. He had a case on his hands which required to be handled with care, or it would go against him, and he was trying to decide what was the best course for him to pursue.

He finally reached a decision.

"I'll call on old Mendick," he muttered, "an' ef sech a thing's possible, I'll bring him ter time. He has got waked up on this case, an' nothin' kin make hi'n more so. I'll make him think ther seven plagues o' Egypt has come ag'in!"

With this ominous declaration, the Solid Man went at once to Mendick's house and rapped at the door. It was opened by Mrs. Schell, the housekeeper, who looked at him coldly and calmly with her deep gray eyes.

"Evenin' marm," said Ike, removing his hat and making a deep bow. "Is his supreme highness, ther jedge, on deck?"

"What do you mean, sir?" she coldly asked.

"Is his eminence at ther hearthstun', or is his feet treadin' other paths at this evenin' hour?"

"Judge Mendick is not in," was the frigid reply.

"No?"

"Do you doubt my word?"

"You must be a mind-reader, marm, fur that leetle idee did percolate through my head. P'raps ye mean he's only at hum ter his bosom friends. Wal, that takes me in, so you kin show me his beautiful phiz immediate."

"I have told you once he is not at home," was the haughty reply, "and he would not see you if he was. You have been here once before, and we have had quite enough of you and your style. You can go as soon as you see fit."

She made a motion to close the door, but he thrust his boot into the crevice, and then pushed his whole body through.

"I'm not ter be bulldozed by no returnin' board," he declared with a frown. "I'm Iron Ike, Ther Solid Man from Slow-Coach, an' I'm a malignant fever which no quinine kin cure.

Look out fur me, fur I'm contagious when I git mad. I feel sure his serene majesty, the jedge, is in, an' I'm goin' ter see him ef ther old ship holds tergether. You hear me? Ef ye do, take notice that I'm a bad man with double teeth, an' don't—"

The Solid Man showed no sign of getting out of breath, but every moment Mrs. Schell's anger was increasing, and she suddenly whirled, caught up a broom and made a dash for the unwelcome visitor.

Iron Ike may have been the champion fighter of California—being a stranger in Gold Bar, no one could prove to the contrary—but this mode of attack was new to him, and he whirled and made a dash for the door.

Mrs. Schell brought down the broom, but it merely brushed the coat of the flying culprit, and he went out like a missile sent from a cannon.

"E pluribus Jones!" he ejaculated, when he saw there was no danger of pursuit. "This hyar beats ther six days' record, an' makes my back teeth chatter. I kin now catch a dim, far-away idee o' ther joys o' married life. By ther 'tarnal, ef I'se ter marry, I'd take that woman fer my better-half. She's a clipper with a gong-bell fur a tongue, an' what she sez goes as it lays. Wal, I should smile!"

Despite the last assertion, the Solid Man did not smile: on the contrary, he shook his head solemnly and walked away as though *en route* to a funeral.

His serio-comic mood soon vanished, however.

"This hyar woman is a Tartar," he muttered, "an' she's ter be found snæzin' whenever Mendick takes snuff. I marked her as a tough one when I fu'st see'd her, an' it becomes clear ter my idees that ther jedge has put her up ter his leetle racket. Does he suspect jest who I am? I should remark that I've got ter go slow or I'll never find Warren Elwood's son. Whar's my revolvers?"

Was it a presentiment of evil, or something else, which made him suddenly realize that great danger lurked in his path just as long as the war between him and Mendick continued?

Be that as it may, he took the precaution of drawing his revolvers and feeling to make sure that the cartridges were in place, and thus it was that he was ready for what soon followed.

The moon no longer shone, but it had barely set, and the character of the night was a cross between light and darkness. Around the cabins, however, were dark shadows, and Iron Ike did not suspect that real danger was near until a bullet whizzed past his head, closely followed by a report.

It was a close call, but he had seen wild scenes before then, and he rallied at once. He was none too soon, for a second and third bullet followed the first, and he felt a sharp sting on his left arm.

By that time he had made out two forms in the dark shadow, and he blazed away at them in return, with the rapidity and coolness of an old hand.

Almost the first shot was followed by a gasping cry from the shadow, and one man went down in a heap.

"Next!" cried the Solid Man, still blazing away.

But the remaining man did not wait for his turn; he wheeled and fled at a pace which soon left the pursuer far in the rear; and Ike reluctantly retraced his steps.

"Wonder who went down?" he muttered. "He laid still enough ter stay thar—some tool o' Mendick's I dar' say."

He bent over the fallen man for a moment, and then started back in surprise.

"Turk Tucker!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XVI.

RALPH MENDICK'S MISSION.

YES, it was Turk Tucker, but only what was mortal of him. It needed but a brief examination to show that he was dead; the bullet had gone true and ended an existence which had been a curse to all honest people; and he at least, would never bring further trouble to Chris.

Iron Ike did not think of that just then.

"Turk Tucker—hyar!" he ejaculated. "By ther Eternal, thar hez been foul play som'ers. How did he git out o' jail? I reckon I'm wanted elsewhere."

Pausing no longer he strode rapidly toward the improvised jail. He was thoroughly angry, for the quickness with which the fellow had escaped seemed to indicate that he had been deliberately released, and he wondered if the hand of Judge Mendick was in the work.

When he arrived at the jail he found the guards composedly smoking and watching.

"Whar are ther prisoners?" he demanded.

"They're on duty," said one of the miners, with an attempt at facetiousness. "They're mighty mum; we ain't heerd a word from them fur some time."

"Good reason why," retorted Ike. "You infernal fools, they have escaped!"

He dashed open the door and entered. The prison-room was empty. A hole in the floor showed how they had escaped; they had first gone down to the cellar, and then out through the wall.

The guards had followed the Solid Man, and exclamations of surprise fell from their lips when they saw that the prisoners were really gone.

"Hush your whine!" said Iron Ike, imperiously. "I want business hyar, or no talk at all. Tell me ef you really know nothin' how they went."

He looked at them as though to read their minds, but they were innocent and did not waver.

"They never went out without help," he persisted. "Ther way ther' hands was tied would defy better men than them. They had help. Who was it?"

"Pards 'o theirn, I s'pose," ventured one man.

"Pards 'o thunder! Fur a blind man you see wal. O' course 'twas pards—or one pard—but who was ther man?"

It was a question the honest miners could not solve. Josiah Mendick had played a lone hand and left no signs, and the Solid Man was the only person who suspected the truth. He was

disappointed and angry, but he knew it would not do to move against the great man of Gold Bar. To make an accusation would be to make all Gold Bar his enemies, for Mendick was their idol.

"He's won another move in ther game," muttered Ike, grinding his teeth, "but it's a long road that has no turnin'. I'll beat him yit. He thinks ther earth is his, but I'm swingin' around ther circle, an' when ther drag-rope teches my hands I shall ketch on an' hold fast. One thing, Turk Tucker's lopin' is over."

This was a consolation not only to him but to the honest citizens, and they brought in the body and laid it in the late prison-room. The Solid Man had made himself fresh friends, and as he saw his hold on their sympathies, he went quickly at work to strengthen it.

He was weaving a web which had no ordinary motive as the root, and the more backing he could command in town, the better it would be for him.

While he was thus preparing to work to Mendick's harm, the judge was at home and in his own room. In rescuing his tools he had become covered with loose earth, and he made all possible haste to get rid of it. Mrs. Schell he could depend upon, but he had doubts in regard to Ralph.

The latter was not at the house. He had worked in the store all day, and then locked up as usual, but he had not returned home. Mendick, who was beginning to feel like a cornered rat, meditated on this fact with suspicion. What kept his son? Had he, too, turned against him?

When Ralph Mendick left the store he went at once to the cabin of a man who kept a good horse. This animal the youth had previously engaged for an indefinite time, but it had only just occurred to the owner that it was a singular hour for the son of the judge to go out. He made some curious inquiries, but he was not satisfied, and Ralph started off at a brisk trot.

He had set his face toward Crescent Bend, and he had two hours of steady riding ahead of him, and that, too, along a rough, wild road, but he had no fears. He had taken a pair of revolvers, and he felt capable of caring for himself.

The youth was in an unenviable mood. He was one in whom honor was inborn, and he was a practical believer in the justice of the old command to do justice, though the heavens fall.

Much to his regret, he had been compelled to think ill of Judge Mendick. He believed that a son owed respect to a father, and he had tried to do his duty, but the way had proved a rough one. Now, with Spartan firmness he had resolved to know the truth concerning Lulo Vaughan, and if he found his father as guilty as he believed, he was determined to oppose him.

Such a degree of confidence had been established between Chris and himself that the boy had told him where Lulo was to be found, and he was *en route* to interview her.

The ride was a wild and lonely one, but no adventures happened by the way, and, in due

time the lights of Crescent Bend appeared before him. The hour was fast approaching when these lights would be extinguished for the night, but he had timed himself well.

He inquired the way to the house where Lulo had found refuge, and was soon in her presence.

She looked at him doubtfully, for though he had been kind and pleasant when she was a guest at his father's house, the judge had been the same, and his hospitality had been proved worse than a sham. She had tried to think well of Ralph, but she wavered at times.

"I have come on an awkward errand," said the youth, with some embarrassment, when greetings were over, "but I am going to plunge into business at once and earnestly ask your aid. I have seen Chris since he brought you here, and he has given me an idea of how you left our house."

A reaction in Lulo's mind began to set in in favor of Ralph.

"Yes, I told him," she answered.

"There is a mystery about this affair which I would like to clear up," said Ralph, manfully. "Have you any idea why my father should act so strangely?"

"I confess I have not."

"Nor I—I want you to believe that. I did not suspect that you were gone from our house until I awoke in the morning and found you mysteriously missing. My father and Mrs. Schell denied all knowledge of you, and it was not until I had a frank talk with Chris that I knew the facts of the case. I wish you would now tell me in detail what happened."

"Wouldn't that be unpleasant?"

"Unpleasant?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Judge Mendick is your father—"

"Relationship does not serve to make wrong right. I wish to know all," Ralph firmly answered.

Thus urged, Lulo told the story of her midnight departure from the house when the judge delivered her again into the hands of Strong Saul and Turk Tucker. Ralph listened, but he gained no light thereby; indeed, it only served to plunge him deeper into mystery.

"Have you any idea what object my father can have in this unjust persecution?" he asked.

"Frankly, I have not. I am wholly at sea. I do, however, believe that it was he who first caused my capture by Strong Saul and his partner in crime. I even begin to suspect the letter purporting to be from my father, the one which summoned me to this town, was a forgery. Since you ask me to speak plainly, I will confess I suspect Judge Mendick wrote it, lured me to Swingfoot City, had his tools in waiting for me and then made me a prisoner. Why I was taken to Gold Bar I do not know, but I do remember I owe my rescue then to you."

"What about your father? It seems to me there is a mystery surrounding him."

"Oh, no. He is what some people call eccentric. He has plenty of money and a passion for mining-life. Consequently, he goes around from one place to another, all over the West. When I saw him last he promised this year should be the last of his wandering, and when I

received the letter purporting to be from him, summoning me here, I hoped he had at last settled on a place."

"Was it in his hand-writing?"

"Yes."

"What is his full name?"

"Douglas Vaughan."

"Is he well educated?"

"Very well educated."

Ralph shook his head. An idea which had been in his mind received a denial, and he knew not which way to turn. He could only account for the persecution of Lulo by supposing Mendick knew and hated her father, but where was Douglas Vaughan?

All efforts to move further ahead with the mystery proved unavailing, though the conversation had the effect of convincing Lulo that Ralph was in no degree his father's confederate, and that he had her welfare sincerely at heart.

As the young man did not think of returning to Gold Bar until morning he was about to seek quarters at the hotel, but the honest miner who was protecting Lulo asked him to remain where he was over night, and Ralph did not refuse.

He rather liked the idea of being near Lulo, for whom he had taken a strong liking.

He retired and was soon asleep, being wearied by his day's work and subsequent journey, but not many hours had passed when he awoke. He had an idea that something was wrong, or, at least, that something unusual had disturbed him, and he arose and went to the window.

The moon had by that time passed so far below the horizon that the night was dark, but, looking out, he caught sight of something moving near the house, while, a moment later, a dark object passed his window. He needed no close examination to recognize it; he knew a ladder was being removed from the house.

Instantly, he took the alarm, and he thrust his head further out of the window.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

The words had barely passed his lips when the ladder was dropped, and he heard and saw a man running away at full speed. This was enough; Ralph twice fired his revolver to give the alarm, and then began to dress hurriedly.

By the time this was done the household was astir. The first move of the miner was to see if Lulo was safe, and then he came rushing into Ralph's room.

"Ther gal is gone!" he exclaimed.

"Gone!"

"Yes."

"Then, by my life, Turk Tucker has again abducted her. Quick, Welch, we may not be too late to save her!"

They hurried out, their revolvers held ready for use, and looked for the abductors. The ladder by means of which Lulo's room had been reached was found lying on the ground, but though they made every possible effort they could find no trace of the girl nor of the kidnappers.

Before the search was abandoned they had plenty of assistants, for Mrs. Welch had given the alarm and people had turned out generally, but it was finally decided that nothing could be done that night. In the morning they vowed to move *en masse* and show the roughs that

they could not play their games in Crescent Bend.

A disagreeable surprise awaited Ralph when they gathered again at the village.

"Young feller," said one of the men, "we've got ter wait fur ther gal, but we mean ter show you right away that we ain't blind, an' that no tough kin come over from Gold Bar and kick up a muss."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that *you* are at ther bottom o' this abduction. That's why ye come ter Welch's. You let ther abductors in, 'cordin' ter a laid-out scheme, an' you got away with ther gal; but, by ther 'tarnal, ye can't git away with us. We give ther *rope* ter sech varmints."

"Hang him! hang him!" exclaimed several voices from the crowd.

"Bet yer life we'll hang him! Whar's ther rope?"

The rope was brought, and despite Welch's arguments and Ralph's assertion of innocence, a noose was placed around his neck and he was dragged to a tree they had selected for the gallows.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHRIS DISCOVERS SOMETHING.

THE following day saw a decisive change at Gold Bar. The citizens were informed by Judge Mendick that he had a word to say to them, and that he would prefer that labor be suspended for at least half a day.

The idea was pleasing to nearly all, and very few people failed to assemble to hear what he had to say. He mounted a dry-goods case in front of his store and made a speech, which was liberally applauded.

He referred to the recent lawless deeds in and around Gold Bar, and expressed the opinion that their village had assumed an importance which justified them in forming a regular Government, and he moved that a mayor, sheriff and some other officers be elected.

Of course the people agreed with him; they wondered they had so long neglected this necessary step; and it was moved that the election take place at once.

Mendick was silent as to his preference for mayor, but he asked that his friend, Mr. Cribbs, be made sheriff, and the result was clear from the first. By an overwhelming majority, Mendick was made mayor and Cribbs sheriff.

The new officials entered upon their duties at once. Ralph had not returned, and Mendick's store remained closed, but he cared nothing for that; he had more important business with which to occupy his time.

His first step was to urge the arrest of Locke—who had promised to keep out of sight—and a solution of the mystery attending Lulo Vaughan's disappearance. He spoke of these matters because he dared not neglect them, hoping luck would favor him and defeat justice. Sheriff Cribbs was his ready tool, and he knew he would not find them if it was possible to overlook them.

Next, he worked around to mention Chris. The men of Gold Bar had found a skeleton

under the river under circumstances which indicated foul play, but the boy had secured and concealed the knife, instead of placing it in the hands of those who would try to solve the mystery. He had refused to surrender it; but, in his opinion, Chris should be compelled to give way to his elders.

It was an artful address, which changed the current of the miners' opinions.

They decided that Chris had been too forward, and that he must surrender the knife.

Accordingly they acquiesced in the suggestion that, if the boy detective remained stubborn, Sheriff Cribbs should arrest him.

On the whole Mendick scored a decisive victory, and, though well aware that there were several dark clouds on his horizon, he hoped to add to his victories and make a clean sweep. He had a scheme in mind by which he hoped to place Iron Ike in captivity on a serious charge before darkness fell.

When this conference was being holden, Chris and the Solid Man were having a private talk outside.

"Wal, boyee," said Ike, "ye see we're left with ther feeble minority. Old Mendick sweeps up ther loaves an' don't leave us so much ez ther crumbs."

"C'rect!" Chris agreed. "We've got ter live on cake."

"We'll live on air an' die on hemp, ef ther jedge—I mean ther mayor—hez his way," grimly added Ike.

"He'd better keep ter hisself, or thar'll be a fu'st-class riot 'round hyar," Chris asserted. "Even ef he's mayor he can't hev ther earth—I won't bear no cheap talk from him."

"Put it thar, pard! You're a good one from ther ground up, an' we'll yoke in an' pull ez a pair. I hev reasons ter b'lieve ye're not only true blue, but sharp enough not ter do anything brash when it's policy ter lay low, eh?"

"I'm no give-away."

"Good, then. Wal, one word about ther skeleton found under ther river. Hev you ther knife still?"

"I opine I hev, a few."

"See to it Mendick don't get it. He'll try hard, fur he's got his reasons. I b'lieve he killed ther man found under ther river."

Ike looked keenly at the boy.

"Possible?" coolly asked Chris.

"I gave my opinion. I think the case is right hyar. About fourteen year ago three men were prospectin' through hyar. They was Josiah Mendick, Warren Elwood an' Thomas Biddle. Ther last was no man fur ther biz, an' he seceded an' left ther fu'st two alone. Nigh whar they was located was another party o' prospectors. One o' them was named A. G. Ransom. He was killed by a fallin' rock, an' Elwood an' Mendick attended ther funeral. I think one o' them then become possessor o' Ransom's knife, but I hev no proof on't. Yet, with that knife—ther same you now hev—Elwood was killed. Yes, I've got around ter say it at last—the skeleton was that o' Elwood, ez I kin prove by ther teeth."

Chris was listening and watching keenly.

"Be you a detective?" he asked.

"I be."

"I thought so. Blaze away!"
 "Do you foller me?"
 "Yer discourse is tolerably plain."
 "Can you tell me how ter prove all this?"
 "Can't say I kin."
 "Wal, thar's one missing link."
 "That's what Darwin said."

"Don't be so previous," said the Solid Man, tartly. "We're talkin' biz now, not pleasure. Ther missin' link is a certain man I can't find. After Biddle left Mendick an' Elwood, they pooty soon took in another pardner, a man named Joe Hanshaw."

Iron Ike was looking at vacancy and did not notice Chris's sudden start, but from that moment the boy felt that the Gold Bar Detective Agency had a chance to win glory.

"Hanshaw seems to have remained with them ez long ez they mined, fur when Mendick turned toward 'Frisco, he—Hanshaw—was with him. Elwood was not. I argue ther last was killed hyar in the mountains. Hanshaw then went ter Sacramento, an' when thar, an' in liquor, he give away the fact that one o' his pards had killed t'other in ther mountain, ter git his gold-dust. Arter that, thar is no trace o' Hanshaw."

"Dead, mebbe," said Chris.

"I hope not, fur I want ter find him. His testimony, ef it's what I think, would hang Mendick."

"An' you hev no idee whar he is?"

"None."

"That's onlucky," said Chris, shutting one eye and looking at the sky with the other.

"I want yer help ter find him."

"Mine?"

"Yas."

"What kin I do?"

"You an' Ralph Mendick is friends. Now I want yer ter talk ter him on ther sly an' put him up ter ask ther jedge what hez become o' Joe Hanshaw. Ther youngster kin do it an' he won't think nothin' on't; whereas, ef anybody else questioned him, he would tumble to the racket right away. See?"

Chris acknowledged that he did see, and, after some further conversation, the two separated. Chris at once started for Old Leather's cabin.

"C. King, Esquire, hyar's a chance fur you ter win yer fu'st case with a blaze o' glory. Ther Gold Bar Detective Bureau will spring at once ter ther highest pinnacle o' fame, an' ther skelington will sleep in peace fur ther fu'st time in many years. Thar's no time like ther present, an' you better strike immejiate."

Thus soliloquizing, the boy strode home and entered the shanty, Old Leather had returned to his bench and was industriously hammering. He looked up surlily as Chris entered, but said nothing.

"O. L., I am 'pointed fer ter announce I am ther b'arer o' bad news," quoth the young detective.

"What's eatin' ye now?" growled the cobbler.

"Thar ain't nothin' eatin' me, nur likely to. I'm neither bread nor cheese. Nevertheless, ther ossifers o' law are on yer track, thar's a warrant out fer ther arrest o' Joe Hanshaw ez an accomplice in ther murder o' Warren Elwood,

an' I reckon thar'll be a hangin'-bee ef ye don't do somethin' soon, with all yer might."

Long before he was through Old Leather had dropped his hammer and was staring at the boy with wild eyes and white face. He was a badly frightened man.

"I didn't lay a hand on Elwood," he declared, shrilly.

"Jest what I told 'em," quoth Chris. "Sez I, 'It was Si Mendick that did it, an' O. L. is perfectly innercent.'"

"That's ther fact. Mendick claimed ther biggest share o' ther money, 'cause he said he was an experienced miner, an' when Elwood wouldn't allow it, he stabbed him three times in ther breast. At ther third stroke ther knife was left thar, an' buried with him, an' that's ther knife you found. Ther skeleton was Elwood's."

The cobbler poured forth his confession vehemently, but Chris retained the composure a detective should have.

"But that knife had the name 'A. G. Ransom' on it."

"It once b'longed to a man o' that name, but he was killed, and then it went inter Mendick's hands."

"Jest my theory ag'in," quoth the Gold Bar Detective. "I argued that way, an' I so infloenced ther ossifers that they said ef your statement agreed with my theory you would be all hunki-dori."

"That's ther fact," said Old Leather, quickly, "an' I'll sw'ar ter it."

"Then let's look up ther ossifer-in-chief, right away. I know whar ter find him, an' ef you'll 'company me, we'll go 'thout any delay."

"Durned ef I don't do it. I've carried this secret on my mind long enough, fur I've always been afeered it would recoil an' hit me, instead o' him. Come on; I'm ready!"

Old Leather tossed aside his apron, put on his hat and they sallied forth from the shanty, but at the very door they met Quong Ho, the Chinaman, and a big negro whose name was John Jay. The two had allied themselves to go in search of Chris, after Mendick decided to arrest the boy, and they were ahead of the sheriff and every one else.

"Hi-yi! hyar he is!" cried Jay.

"Debbil 'Melican boy git tookee now, all samee," said Quong Ho. "Come on, pardee!"

And the two rushed at Chris, an ugly gleam in their eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GOLD BAR DETECTIVE WINS.

The Gold Bar Detective was taken wholly by surprise, and their hands were on him before he could make a movement to run, but even then he was not easily subdued. He kicked, struck and scratched like a young tiger, and both negro and Chinaman received marks they were likely to carry for some time to come.

But, just as he was subdued, their triumph came to an untimely end.

Iron Ike had been within sight of the affray, and when he saw how it was going he promptly hastened to Chris's aid. The first warning the two captors received came in the shape of his stern voice.

"Hands up, my prize chromos! I'm a devourin' buzz-saw when I git ter eatin', an' thar'll be a churchyard yawin' fur you ef ye kick ag'in' ther fates. Hands up!"

He was never more docilely obeyed than then, for both were thorough cowards when cornered, but Chris, who had been roughly handled, stood rubbing his aching arms, and glared at them fiercely.

"You're ther two meanest skunks I ever see'd," he declared, "an' I'll make ye weep fur this. Two on ye enter a kid o' my small caliber! It's a wonder ye don't hev galvanic convulsions. I ain't got time to fix ye now, but I'm goin' ter take it outer ye at my 'arliest convenience."

Then he turned to Iron Ike.

"Low me ter interdooce ter ye, Mr. Joe Hanchaw," he said. "His testimony will do jest what we want, an' I claim ther credit fur C. King's Gold Bar D. B., which is Detective Bureau. Don't ye forget it!"

The Solid Man was surprised, but a few minutes' conversation with Old Leather removed all doubts. Then the man's rough manner disappeared, he straightened his form and looked like a different person.

"I am now ready to face Mendick," he said, in good English. "I am a regular detective of the State of California, and though Mendick is powerful here, I know Gold Bar will array itself on the side of law and justice."

"Thar's some sort o' a picnic goin' on at ther jedge's temple o' jestice; what is it?" Chris asked.

Ike looked sharply.

"Those are men from Crescent Bend," he said. "Why are they here, in a body? Let us go and see!"

They went, and they found a most spirited dialogue in progress, to explain which we must go back to the time when we left Ralph in danger of being lynched.

He met with no harm at the hands of the men. Some of the hot-headed ones would have carried out their purpose, but, luckily, cooler heads were there, and Ralph was released, and the rope put away.

One of the men had a fine hound, and this was brought out and put upon the trail. The miners followed, and the hunt resulted in complete success. Lulo had been abducted by Locke and another man, but, thanks to the dog, their triumph was short.

The girl was rescued, and Locke and his partner taken prisoners, whereupon the leading villain made a full confession. When Crescent Bend knew what a villain Judge Mendick was, they went in a body to inform Gold Bar, and this was the scene Chris and Iron Ike came upon.

The Solid Man saw at once that Gold Bar was reluctant to believe, and he promptly pushed to the front.

"I've a word to say here, fellow-citizens," he announced. "It won't do any good for you to pin your faith on Mendick, for he won't be with you long. I have a warrant for his arrest for murder committed fourteen years ago, and so fades your brightest star. He killed Warren Elwood and buried him under the river; it was

his skeleton you lately found. I am a detective, and have been looking up the case in a quiet way, which I may call a shadow-hunt. I am in disguise, and my real name is Douglas Vaughan!"

He ceased speaking, but there was a cry from the crowd, and Lulo, whom he had not before seen, sprung forward with extended hands.

"Father!" she exclaimed.

The detective looked dumfounded.

"What! you—you—Ha! are you the girl who has been persecuted by Mendick? I did not suspect it before. I heard your name spoken but once, and then I understood it to be Rollins. Great heavens! how come you here?"

Judge Mendick broke in with a harsh laugh.

"I may as well tell you that. I heard that Vaughan, the detective, was on my track, and I resolved to beat him in a game of wits. It was my game to kidnap his daughter, and when he closed in on me I would say; 'Let me alone, or your daughter dies!' But the whole business has gone to the dogs. Your disguise, and dialect, fooled me at first; I did not suspect you were a detective—Ah! well, what's the odds? 'Life's but a fleeting shadow,' anyhow."

"What have you to say about the lost son of Warren Elwood?"

"Dead!" Mendick declared.

"Wrong, again. He lives! After you killed his father you feared the presence of the son at the East would lead to an investigation, and you forged a letter—you are very good at forgery—and had him sent West. The child was then but five years old, and had not seen his father for over two years. When you claimed him, saying you were Warren Elwood, he did not know he was being deceived. You took him; you reared him as your own son; he is now known as Ralph Mendick!"

There was another cry from the crowd, and those who looked toward the point from which it came, saw Ralph standing with a pale, agitated face. But the revelation was not an unpleasant one.

"I ain't nobody's long-lost son," put in Chris, as a lull followed, "but I'm a rectangular revenger when I've been misused, an' I demand satisfaction on them two chromos over thar, who has pummeled me all up inter a sirl'ine steak. Ther dignity o' ther Gold Bar Detective Bureau must be preserved ef it takes a rib."

"You were badly used," said Iron Ike, or Vaughan, to give him his true name, and he frowned upon Quong Ho and the negro. "You have rendered me valuable aid in ferreting out the criminals by your fearless detective work. What satisfaction do you desire?"

Chris answered in a subdued voice, and the detective laughed. Then an open space was made in the crowd, with a table in the center, and Quong Ho and John Jay ordered to stand upon it. After that, their left arms were tied tightly together at the wrists and each given a short, stout whip.

The crowd scented fun ahead—for them, not for the Chinaman and negro—and smiles were on every face except that of Chris. He remained as grave as a judge, and mounted a chair to bring himself into view.

"Now, then, ther prisoners at ther bar, Quong Ho, ther Heathen Chinee, and John Jay, ther colored gent, will take heed o' what I say. Ez jedge o' this s'perior court, an' chief o' ther Gold Bar Bureau, I order ye ter flog each other till I give ye leave ter stop, which I sha'n't do till ye smart ez much ez I do. Lay on, Michael Duff, and may ther best man win!"

Neither negro or Chinaman offered to strike, and a big miner moved forward with a whip larger than that held by either of them.

"Do ez you're told," he said, "or I'll chip in, an' ef I do you'll think ther shirts are droppin' off o' ye. Go it!"

They hesitated no longer but earnestly began, and the whips arose and fell amid the cheers of the miners. At first the blows were light, but each man began to think his rival was laying on too hard, and it soon became a regular race to see who could hit the hardest.

"Hooray!" shouted Chris, "this hyar is ther war o' races!"

It was a festive occasion which put a lighter touch on what had gone before, for there was no disposition to torture either Quong Ho or John Jay. The former had on his usual clothes, and the negro a thick shirt, and had the blows not been lusty ones they would scarcely have been felt.

As it was they were made to lay on until Chris announced himself satisfied; then they were released and allowed to skulk away.

Gold Bar had lost its great man and there was a disposition to feel sorry for it, but after he confessed his crime no one dared openly sympathize with him. Old Leather, however, became a most unpopular man.

Unlike the long-lost sons of the stage drama, there was no great fortune awaiting Ralph Elwood. If his father had left any great amount it was lost to him, and it was found that Mendick, every time he visited San Francisco, had gambled so heavily as to lose nearly all he possessed.

But Ralph soon decided that he had found a good friend in Mr. Vaughan, and resolved to remain with him.

It was settled that the following morning Vaughan, Lulo, Ralph, two assistants and the prisoners, should leave for Swingfoot City, but Mendick did not go. He was found dead in his cell. Poison had been conveyed to him by Mrs. Schell, who then fled, and was never again heard of by our friends.

Chris was invited to accompany the party, but he declined.

"My int'rests are pooty considerable identified with Gold Bar," he said, "an' hyar I'll remain an' grow up with their country. Possibly I might get richer by goin' ter 'Frisco, but I don't vant ther earth, nohow. I'll stay hyar an' run ther Gold Bar D. B., an' ef toughs don't keep ter theirselves thar will be a vacant chair at their fireside. Much obligeed, but I'll hang onter Gold Bar!"

And he remained.

Some years have passed since the scenes of our story occurred. Locke is still in prison. Old Leather, acquitted on technical grounds, disappeared.

Douglas Vaughan has given up detective work, for what was once a passion with him became dull enough when Lulo became Mrs. Ralph Elwood and grand-children began to be seen in their home.

Chris has prospered. Brave, shrewd and honest, he had just the gifts to make a successful business man, and so he has done. He deserves his good fortune, but the honors time has brought him are modestly worn.

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